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JUNE 2008

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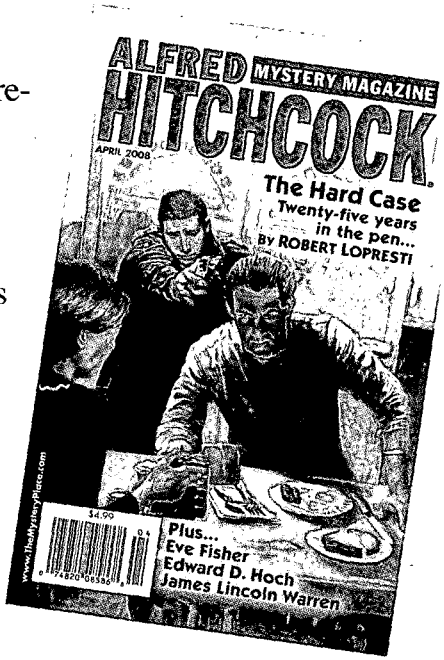

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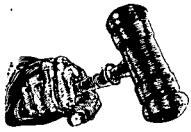
CONTENTS

In Wolfe's footsteps
Page 58

Roadside riddle
Page 76

Cover photograph by Michael Culligan



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Note: indicia on page 144

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FICTION

A Wandering-Daughter Job
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 7

The Best Suit
BY PETER LOVESEY 21

Cruel and Unusual
BY CLARK HOWARD 32

Who's Afraid of Nero Wolfe?
BY LOREN D. ESTLEMAN 58

Forget Me Never
BY TERENCE FAHERTY 76

Clay Pillows
BY JAMES POWELL 105

Floored
BY TWIST PHELAN 111

SPECIAL FEATURE

Edward D. Hoch: In Memoriam 2

REVIEWS

Blog Bytes BY BILL CRIDER 31
The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 73

BLACK MASK

The Blonde Tigress
BY MAX ALLAN COLLINS 86

PASSPORT TO CRIME

The Center of the Web
BY CHRISTIAN X. FERDINANDUS 130

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

Exercise is Murder
BY MEREDITH S. COLE 121

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EDWARD D. HOCH: IN MEMORIAM

On Thursday, January 17, 2008, Edward D. Hoch, a contributor to this magazine with a 35-year unbroken streak of monthly publication, died of a heart attack at his home in Rochester, New York. We know that to many of our readers this news will be experienced as the loss of a friend they never had a chance to meet.

Ed's appreciation for his readers showed in his next-day response to almost every reader letter we forwarded to him. In at least one instance, a reader's fan note generated a twenty-year correspondence. For those of us who had the good fortune to know Ed in person, such evidences of his openness and warmth even to people he'd never met came as no surprise. His reputation as a good and gentle man was almost as important to his legendary status in the community of mystery writers and editors as his prodigious output of first-rate short stories.

Ed Hoch's long association with *EQMM* goes back to 1962 when he first made a sale to editor Fred Dannay. Many of the 28 series Ed developed over the course of his career have run exclusively in *EQMM*. They include that featuring his lovable thief Nick Velvet, who found his way onto French TV in the 1970s. Among the "objects of little or no value" that were the target of Velvet's larceny was the "ostracized ostrich" of the final Velvet story, which won the 2007 *EQMM* Readers Award (an honor revealed to Ed prior to his death). His next planned Velvet story (unwritten, sadly) was inspired by a letter from a wife desperate to get her husband to stop wearing an old shirt. "I thought of Nick Velvet," she wrote. "He could steal it and dispose of it before my husband discovered it missing." Readers all over the world had that kind of genial, intimate rapport with Ed through his characters. Collections from his 940-plus stories saw print in countries such as China, Japan, Thailand, Germany, Iceland, and Sweden, and everywhere they drew fans who wrote and urged Ed to let his characters live on.

And they did go on, except that unlike most authors, Ed let his characters age in real time. Only a writer as clever at plotting as Ed could manage that gracefully, finding plausible reasons for reactivating his ex-spy, Rand, or including his retired police captain, Leopold, in new adventures. But then, Ed was among the most ingenious writers ever to work in the genre. He had a bottomless reservoir of ideas, and once told me (his editor of 17 years and 188 stories) that he didn't like writing novels because he was always full of new ideas before the novel could be completed.

As Ed himself aged there was no diminution to his productivity. He always had many literary irons in the fire. From 1976 to 1995 he partnered with his wife Patricia (to whom he was devoted) to read every mystery story published and make selections for two best-of-the-year series. Later, he served on numerous judging committees for short-story awards.

Ed was himself a recipient of virtually all of the field's top honors. A Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, he also won an Edgar and two Anthony Awards for best short story and lifetime achievement awards from the Private Eye Writers of America, the Short Mystery Fiction Society, and the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention.

Several more new stories, and reprints of others that only saw print elsewhere, remain before Ed's *EQMM* streak is broken. His presence will still be felt here, as a cherished friend, and as part of the spirit that guides this magazine, long after that day arrives. ***Janet Hutchings***

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Fellow MWA Grand Masters

For longer than I can remember, I've turned first to Ed Hoch's story when I've opened *EQMM*. That the man produced rich, readable short fiction in such volume for so many years is clearly as impossible as any puzzle Sam Hawthorne ever had to contend with; that he moved through life with such gentle grace and good humor makes his loss one we'll feel profoundly.

Lawrence Block

Ed was a simple man, at home with the immeasurable human complexities. He loved to talk craft, and lunch with Ed could shed a soft light on his guest's hard problem. He was almost always the host, generous of mind and pocket. And he was carefully honest, for he would tell you what you needed to know, not always what you wanted to hear. He was fun to be with, and a delight to read. Our genre will survive his passing, but it is a lot poorer today.

Dorothy Salisbury Davis

Ed Hoch was king of the mystery short-story writers, as well as a fast friend in both good times and bad. I'll miss his wry wit, his kindness, and his ability to create fiendish twists and surprise endings. There was no getting ahead of his storytelling; at least, he fooled me every time.

Marcia Muller

I was privileged to have known Ed for more than 35 years. He was a good friend, a kind and true gentleman, and little short of a genius when it came to concocting and writing the mystery short story—a man blessed with the most wonderfully fertile and inventive imagination of any writer I've ever read. I'll miss him immensely. ***Bill Pronzini***

Fellow Writers: U.S., U.K. and Canada

It is impossible to imagine Ed Hoch not alive. There he would be at every possible crime get-together—a lovable presence: welcoming, guffawing, always one of the life and souls of the party. And he could be a chiding presence too: When in a panel session I said I didn't read short stories, he made it clear this was a sin infinitely worse than the love that dares not speak its name. What a wonderful life he and Pat lived together, and how they both have enriched ours!

Robert Barnard

Ed Hoch was one of the first writers I met when I joined MWA in 1982. He was always a man of good cheer, generous with his time, and thoughtful in his analysis of the mystery short story, which is surely his to claim as sole proprietor. During our encounters at mystery events over the years, he was quick with his praise and a constant and enthusiastic champion of both new and established writers. He was a master of invention and more importantly, a gentleman. He was probably working on a short story when he died.

Sue Grafton

To me, Ed Hoch was the living archetype of a mystery writer: a quiet, polite, unassuming, ever-smiling gentleman who spent his days dreaming up ways to connive, steal, and murder. In his

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unflagging enthusiasm, his perseverance, his dogged creativity, and his generosity toward other writers, he was a true ambassador of the craft. What I admired most about him was that he did not allow the changing marketplace to change him, and, in doing so, blazed a trail such that none will ever follow, stretching nearly a thousand stories long. Such intransigence is itself the way of the artist. Of all the "impossible crime" stories Ed was noted for, perhaps the most amazing was the one he perpetrated himself: he made a successful living crafting short stories. In many ways, I think Ed Hoch may be the only true writer I've ever met. **Chuck Hogan**

Ed Hoch and I shared a table of contents page for the first time in the January 1957 issue of *Crime and Justice Detective Story Magazine.* I knew him longer than I knew any other fellow writer. His writing tenacity, work ethic, and storytelling ability made him unique in our profession. I doubt that anyone will ever match his short story output. **Clark Howard**

Modest, amiable, and generous, Ed was one of those people who lit up a room with his smile. Yet as a writer he was formidable. To make a career of over fifty years from short stories and little else demonstrates amazing self-belief and application. What a marvellous legacy he has left us—about a thousand stories sharply written, immaculately plotted, and never deviating from his standard of fair play. **Peter Lovesey**

Back in the early '80s, as an unknown with only one novel to my name, I attended my first dinner meeting of MWA's NY chapter. I knew no one and felt quite intimidated to be in the same room with so many "names." But Ed and Pat Hoch immediately took me under their wings and out for drinks afterwards, where Ed regaled me with tales of his own early days at MWA when he was in the military at the end of WWII. The highlight of any conference was running into Ed and Pat, having breakfast together or a quick drink or dishing with them at the *EQMM* Edgars parties. Ed was a true professional who deserved every one of his accolades and awards, but he was also one of the good ones—devoid of ego, devoted to his wife, and someone I genuinely miss. **Margaret Maron**

I'm sitting with Ed and Pat Hoch after a Crime Writers of Canada dinner. Ed just presented me with the short-story prize. We're talking books. I set him up. I say I'm reading a 1997 edition of *The Red Right Hand* with one of the most incisive introductions ever penned. Ed looks up slowly; memory flutters behind his eyes. "I wrote that," he says, and his entire face beams the proud, proprietary grin of a Rochester kid with a Rangers card of a player sent up to the Twins. It's that smile I'll remember, Ed's big-league smile. **Dennis Murphy**

Ed Hoch was the Will Shortz of short detective fiction, the puzzlemaster par excellence. But he was also a genuinely good per-

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son, so open-minded and giving, such a pleasure to be with, that I would count my near forty years of friendship and interaction with him as one of the rare privileges of my life if he had never written a word. ***Francis M. Nevins***

Ed Hoch was an amazing individual. Though I didn't know him well, I was struck by his graciousness, his intelligence, the width and depth of his reading, and his wholly unpretentious manner. Ed Hoch has seemed to me a gentleman from another era, a true professional with a zest for his craft and a love of mystery writing that is unparalleled in our time. We will all miss him very much—*EQMM* will not be the same without a story of Ed's. ***Joyce Carol Oates***

Whether it was at Bouchercon or Bloody Words, I could always guarantee that sooner or later I'd bump into Ed and Pat Hoch wandering around the corridors. And they'd always greet Sheila and me with a friendly smile, a handshake from Ed, and a big hug from Pat. Conversation would almost immediately proceed to short stories, and I could be sure Ed would be aware of my latest effort and have something positive to say. He encouraged so many people in what is often seen as a difficult and thankless form of writing that it is impossible to overestimate his influence. We also talked about taking the Lake Ontario ferry from Toronto to Rochester (on those rare occasions when it was running!) but we never did. Now there's no reason. We'll miss him. ***Peter Robinson***

During high school, a friend and I read both *EQMM* and *AHMM* regularly. Ed Hoch was among our favorite authors. Years later, before we met, Ed did me a tremendous favour, including my first published story on his *Year's Best* Honor Roll. This was thrilling, and it helped alter the course of my writing career. My letter of thanks to him, via his publisher, was replied to right away. I had learned my first lesson about the kind of extraordinary man Ed was. Those myriad readers who know the work and love Ed the writer would have loved the man even more. Of unique stature in his field, he was always kind, generous, and supportive. When we met for the first time, at a Bouchercon, Ed invited me to join him and Pat for a drink as if we were old friends. He made me feel I belonged. Ed, you made my life better. God bless. ***Peter Sellers***

Fellow Editors and Aficionados

Ed Hoch was not just a staggeringly prolific author, he was also an enthusiastic collaborator. Back in the late '80s I worked for the company that owned *EQMM* and any time we set out to put together an anthology of stories on a given theme, we knew we could call Ed and in minutes have knowledgable recommendations from decades of not only his own stories but his reading of others' work. When we had a question about the magazine's history, Ed was the go-to guy. And when I broke into *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories, no one could have been more excited for me. I'll never forget the look of pride in Ed's eyes, twenty years later, when he handed me the best-

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short-story Edgar. No one represented the mystery short-story writer's art better than Ed, and no one could have worn that mantle with more grace. ***Charles Ardai***

It was an honor to know Ed Hoch. I first met him in the mid '80s when I worked at Mystery Writers of America. He was a strong supporter—and member—of many authors organizations. Ed was also a walking encyclopedia of the mystery, past and present, and loved to answer questions, the harder the better. He was one of the finest friends anyone could ever have, and his stories were so delightful we hoped he'd go on for many more years. ***Mary Frisque***

Around 1980, at a Bouchercon Convention, I set up a panel on locked-room mysteries. The star, of course, was my friend Ed Hoch, who even then had surpassed all specialists in this form of literary trickery except for the great master, John Dickson Carr. The format was that I invented seemingly impossible crimes—for instance, a disappearance from the Channel Tunnel between England and France—and challenged the panelists to devise solutions. Of Ed's 950 or so short stories, 120 featured such impossible crimes. Needless to say, he came up with convincing explanations to my challenge in record time. As Carr remarked of Ed's inventiveness, "Satan himself would be proud of his ingenuity." On one occasion, at a convention, I recall Ed producing a full story plot between getting on an escalator and arriving at the top. There will never be another like him. ***Doug Greene***

With the death of Edward D. Hoch, the mystery community lost a major writer. He brought pleasure to readers hundreds of times with his stories, which challenged them with fair-play clues and often were of that most difficult to write subgenre: the impossible crime. I lost a friend of more than thirty years, a kind and generous man who helped me more times than I can count. ***Marvin Lachman***

In an era in which the detective short story became a rara avis, Ed Hoch was a prolific producer of that most demanding form. His stories relied on the old-fashioned notion of observation and deduction, with cerebral elements taking center stage. Violence, sex, obscenity, and gutter life were not to be found in his work. While he was not a notably original stylist, his stories were beloved partly because of the clarity of his prose, the mind-bending puzzles he created, and a notable collection of series characters who were intelligent and kindly, reflecting the author's own personality. ***Otto Penzler***

Ed was a legend, but also a friend. Once a year the Hochs, Doug Greene, and I would meet for dinner. Discussing everything from politics to current movies, from religion to Ed's latest stories, our dinners were lively, loving, and laughter-filled. Everywhere we went, Ed ordered the same meal (filet mignon, fries, glass of milk, vanilla ice cream), but he thrilled us with his encyclopedic knowledge, his uncanny plots, and his sweet laughter. ***Steve Steinbock***

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A Wandering-Daughter Job

by Edward D. Hoch

Since we'd been in business together, my partner Mike Trapper had taken the first two weeks in July for his vacation. It was a slow time of year for Darlan & Trapper, and he had a young wife who liked to travel. That was fine with me, because I was always something of a loner. I'd taken Mike on as a partner years ago simply because I was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy and he had family money to invest.

These days we handled mainly insurance fraud. There wasn't much divorce business anymore, and I would have loved a wandering-daughter job like the old private eyes used to get. I suppose that was why I was secretly pleased when Sam Borden phoned me that Tuesday morning. "It's about finding my daughter," he said. "Could you come over?"

I'd known Sam off and on for a long time. Some years back he'd been our landlord, owner of the old building that housed our office. He'd moved on to bigger and better things, becoming a small-scale real estate tycoon in our medium-sized city. I remembered he had a daughter who'd be in her early twenties now.

He was awaiting me in his office, with a smiling face and a hairpiece that looked like a bird's nest. "Glad you could come so quickly, Darlan," he said, giving me a firm handshake. "How are things with your new landlord?"

"We never see him. We just mail in the rent check every month. But what can I do for you? You said on the phone you want me to find your daughter."

He nodded, motioning me to a chair. "Melanie left home about ten months ago and we haven't heard from her since. Judith has been frantic." Then, in case I didn't remember, he added, "Judith is her mother, my former wife."

"How old is Melanie now?"

"She just turned twenty-three."

"Old enough to be on her own," I pointed out.

"Parents don't stop caring about their children once they become adults. At times I've been too strict with her, but it's always been

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for her own good."

"Do you know where she is?"

"I know where she'll be this Saturday, July seventh." He turned on a television set in the office wall. "I copied this off the Internet, from one of those things like YouTube where people can post their own videos."

I saw an attractive red-haired girl seated at a piano. She sang a brief song inviting everyone to her wedding at 7:07 P.M. on 7/7/07. It was to take place on Governors Island in New York harbor and free ferry service would be available.

"That's Melanie?" I asked

"That's her."

"Who's she marrying?"

"No one, if you can stop her. Judith and I will be in New York Saturday and we must see her before she goes through with this foolishness."

"Do you have her address?"

Borden shook his head. "Probably in New York somewhere. You should be able to find her before Saturday."

"It's a big city," I reminded him. "Can you give me a copy of that video?"

"I made an extra disc for you."

I quoted my daily rate, plus a bonus if I located her before the wedding. He didn't argue, and wrote me a check for my retainer. "Tell me one thing. How did you find out about this clip on the Internet?"

"One of Melanie's old college chums spotted it and thought it looked like her. We confirmed it, of course. There's no doubt."

I thought about it. "If she hasn't sent you her address, can I assume her departure was not amicable?"

"Probably not. She graduated from college a year ago and stayed with me over the summer."

"Why not with her mother?"

"Judith remarried a couple of years back and moved to Cleveland. Melanie doesn't get along with her new stepfather. She preferred to stay with me, but after the freedom of her college years that didn't last long. We had a bit of a row toward the end of summer and she took off for New York."

"What was the row about?"

"She was dating some creep who was dealing drugs. I demanded she break it off before she ended up in jail with him. The next morning she packed her bags and took off in her car. I thought she might turn up at Judith's, but she never did."

"Had she been working during the summer?"

"Not really. She was helping out at a drug-rehab center and that's where she met the guy. Randy Collier is his name."

"Think he's the one she's marrying Saturday?"

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"I've no idea. Far as I know he's still around town."

"Give me the address of this rehab center. I might as well start by talking to him."

The drug-rehab program operated out of a former public library branch in the northeast part of the city, a neighborhood with a high crime rate and little hope for the future. Perhaps it wasn't the best place for an attractive young red-haired woman just out of college to seek summer employment. I parked in a potholed lot behind the building and went around to the front door. A black woman with cornrows was just finishing a telephone conversation which she cut short when she saw me.

"What can I do for you?" she asked with some hesitation.

"I'm looking for Randy Collier. Is he around?"

"You police?" she asked, and I realized why she'd been hesitant. Middle-aged men in suits weren't their usual clientele, even if the suit was a bit on the shabby side.

"Private," I told her and showed my ID. "I'm not here to arrest him, just to talk."

"I don't know if he's around. I'll check." She went off somewhere and returned in a few minutes. "He'll come out."

I wouldn't have been surprised if Randy Collier had been black, but he turned out to be a muscular white man wearing a Dallas Cowboys T-shirt. "What's up?" he asked me. I figured him to be well into his thirties.

"You Randy Collier?"

"Last time I looked."

"I'm trying to locate Melanie Borden. I guess you know her."

"I knew her last summer when she worked here. She's long gone, one of last year's butterflies."

"Her father wants to find her. He said you were dating her."

"Is that what the old man called it?" he asked with a snicker. "Yeah, we hooked up for a while, but then she went away."

"Where to?"

"New York. I guess she had a friend living there, her old college roommate. She wants to be an actress and she figured her old man couldn't track her down in a big city."

I thought about that, wondering why she was suddenly advertising her presence on the Internet. "Do you know her address?"

He shook his head. "Sent me a postcard at Christmas, but no return address."

"Did her father ever try to contact you?"

"He called once, but I told him I didn't know a thing."

"You still got the postcard?"

"No, I tossed it away."

"What was the picture on it?"

"Statue of Liberty, big deal, huh?"

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"What about her roommate's name? Did she ever mention it?"

"Truman, like the old President. Liza Truman, I think."

I thanked him and went back to the office. With Mike away and me off to New York for a few days, I needed someone to cover the office. I called Stacy, our part-time secretary, and asked her to come in Thursday and Friday, after the holiday. Then I played the disc Sam Borden had given me on our office computer. I watched it three or four times. The room could have been anywhere. There was a window visible in the background, and I could see the building across the street, a big red structure with arched windows. I wondered how many days it would take me to find it. I printed out her picture from the disc and put it in my file folder.

On Wednesday morning I filled my gas tank and set out on the six-hour drive to Manhattan. It was easier than flying, especially since I wanted to bring my gun along.

The city was hot and crowded with tourists for the Fourth of July celebration, with rain predicted later. I'd booked a room in lower Manhattan because I suspected Melanie Borden was staying down there somewhere, possibly in Greenwich Village but more likely even further south in SoHo or TriBeCa. After driving around aimlessly for a time searching for that red building with the arched windows, I finally parked the car and checked into my hotel. I had an unsatisfactory meal and a couple of beers, then returned to my room. The first thing to try was the phone book. There was an *M. Borden* in Greenwich Village, but when I called the number it wasn't Melanie. That didn't surprise me. If she'd cut off all contact with her parents she wasn't likely to have a phone listed under her own name. Chances were, she was using a newly purchased cell phone. Outside, the rain had started and I decided to watch the fireworks on the room TV and get an early start in the morning.

There was nothing I could do on Thursday but try to find that red building. I started in the southeast part of Manhattan, and stopped in a neighborhood cafe to show the female bartender the picture of it I'd printed from the disc, with Melanie's face covered. "Can you help me? I'm looking for this building," I said, indicating the one seen out the window.

She looked me over and then shifted her attention to the printout. "I'm not sure, but I think it's one of those cast-iron buildings in SoHo, maybe along Broadway."

I sauntered over to Broadway. The rain had ended hours earlier and it was turning into a pleasant day. This time I asked a traffic cop and he identified the building at once. I followed his directions and found it, a big old loft that had been made over into apartments. I crossed the street to the building opposite and went in. There was a mailbox for a *B. Melanie* in 405, and when I spotted that I stopped looking further. I rang the buzzer and waited, but

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nothing happened. She was probably working somewhere or else away preparing for the wedding.

A young woman entered the lobby as I was leaving, carrying a bag with a loaf of French bread sticking out the top. "Pardon me," I said politely, trying not to frighten her. "I'm looking for Miss Melanie in four-oh-five. Do you know her?"

"No. I've seen her once or twice in the elevator."

"A redhead, isn't she?"

The woman shook her head. "A brunette if she's the one I'm thinking of."

I took out the picture I'd printed from the computer disc. "Would this be her?"

"Hair's the wrong color. I don't think so."

"Forget the hair and look at the face."

But I'd become too insistent. "You a cop or something?"

"A friend of the family. They asked me to look her up while I was in the city."

She shrugged. "Sorry I can't help you."

I left the building wondering what I'd do next. I remembered Melanie's college roommate and checked my notebook for her name. Liza Truman, like the President. Back to checking the phone book again. For all I knew, they might be sharing an apartment. There was one *L. Truman* in the book, at a Broadway address that sounded familiar.

Then I realized it was the building I'd visited not ten minutes ago.

Melanie Borden was living in the same building as her old college roommate.

I'd promised to phone a report to Sam Borden early that evening, before he and his ex-wife flew down here the following day. "I think I've located her," I told him. "I haven't seen her yet, but I have a lower Broadway address for a B. Melanie, in the same building as her former college roommate, Liza Truman. I'm sure it's her, but I'll check it out first thing in the morning."

"Is she living with someone?"

"I'll know that by the time you arrive."

"All right," Sam Borden said. "I've reserved separate rooms for Judith and me at the Hilton. My flight lands at JFK just fifteen minutes ahead of hers so we'll take a cab in together. We should be there by two."

"If I can't meet you there, I'll leave you a message," I promised.

I was up early with the first rays of summer sun and headed downtown, hoping to catch Melanie. There was no answer when I buzzed her apartment at 8:35, but I was ready for that. This time I found Liza Truman's apartment and tried that one. "Yes?" a voice answered over the squeaky intercom.

"I'm looking for Melanie Borden," I said. "She doesn't

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answer her buzzer."

"I don't know any Melanie," the voice responded.

"Sure, you do. She was your college roommate."

"Go away or I'll call the police."

"I am the police," I told her. "I'm coming up."

The entry door buzzed and I was so pleased my bluff had worked that I didn't worry about her calling the cops on me. Her room was right down the hall from Melanie's, number 409, and she was standing in the doorway in a bathrobe, waiting for me. It was the girl with the loaf of French bread that I'd questioned yesterday.

"You're no cop!" she almost shouted when she recognized me. Now that I had time to study her I saw that she must be Melanie's age, with thick black hair, fashionable oval glasses, and a trim figure.

"Private," I explained, holding up my ID. "Melanie doesn't answer her buzzer. You must know where she is."

"Get out of here! Did her father send you?"

"That's right."

"I told her not to put that video on the Internet. Sometimes I think she wants to be found."

"Can you get her to open her door for me? Her parents are arriving later today."

She hesitated and then agreed, with obvious reluctance. I followed her down the hall to 405 and waited while she knocked on the door. "Melanie, it's me. Open up!"

There was nothing but silence. She rapped again, but there was still no answer. "I've got a key," Liza told me. "At college she was always losing things so she gave me a spare to her apartment."

She unlocked the door and we stepped inside. A man lay on his back in the center of the room. He wore only brief swimming trunks and his entire body was painted blue, except for the bullet hole in his chest. He was dead.

I started to ask Liza Truman who the dead man was, but she'd run to the kitchen sink to throw up her breakfast.

I waited for a moment and then followed her into the kitchen. "Are you all right?"

"My God! This is terrible!"

"Do you know him?"

"I . . . I don't know. With that paint all over him I can't be sure."

"We'll have to call the police."

"Shouldn't we wait for Melanie?"

"If she knows about the murder she might be in danger," I replied, not bothering to add that if she knew about the murder she might be the killer. "Did you hear anything that sounded like a shot?"

"I don't think so, but I always shower in the morning and I have the radio on. I might not have heard it."

"What about the people in the next apartment, between you two?"

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"They're in Europe for two weeks. A lot of people take their vacations over the Fourth."

I looked around for the phone but couldn't find it. Then I remembered Melanie wasn't in the book. "What about you? Are you supposed to be at work?"

"It's just a waitressing job. I took off today and tomorrow." She paused, then added, "Melanie and I both want to act. That's why we came to New York."

"Any luck yet?" My eyes were scanning the apartment's surfaces for a cell phone.

"I had a small part off-Broadway. It didn't pay much, but at least I've got something for my résumé. Melanie wanted to try performance happenings." We'd returned to the living room but she carefully averted her gaze from the body on the floor.

I thought of something else. "She had a boyfriend back home, name of Randy Collier. Did he ever come to see her?"

She shook her head. "She wanted to start a new life in New York."

"Does she have a cell phone? I want to call the police."

"Sure. That's the only phone she has."

"I don't see one anywhere."

"I'll get mine and ring her number."

She retreated to her room. When she hadn't returned in a full minute I left the door ajar and went after her. She was just finishing a call. ". . . Okay, I'll talk to you later."

"Who'd you call?" I asked.

"Some guys upstairs who knew her, but she's not there. I'll try Melanie's number now."

She pressed the speed-dial number as we walked back to the missing girl's apartment but there was no hidden phone ringing.

"She must have it with her," I said.

"Wherever it is, she's not answering. I'm calling the police."

I couldn't argue with that, not with a blue man on the floor at my feet. In five minutes the first police car arrived, followed by detectives and the crime-scene investigators. I was suitably impressed.

The detective in charge was named Phillips, and after he'd listened to our story and checked my ID his first question was, "Did you know the dead man, Miss Truman?"

"I'm not sure. She had a few friends who dropped in from time to time. He might have been one of them. It's hard to say."

He turned to me. "You say the missing woman posted a video clip on the Internet saying she was getting married?"

"That's right. At 7:07 P.M. tomorrow, 7/7/07. She must have a thing about sevens."

"There are lots of weddings tomorrow," Phillips confirmed. "I've got a cousin getting married." He glanced around the room. "Does she have a cell phone?"

"We think she took it with her," I told him. "Her parents are fly-

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ing in this afternoon. I'll meet them at their hotel around two."

He glanced at his watch. "I'd like you to bring them down here. The body will be gone by then and I want them to go over her clothing, to see if it's all hers. There's no obviously male clothing in the closets, but this guy didn't come in off the streets in bathing trunks."

"I'll be back a little after two," I agreed.

"Meanwhile we'll be questioning everyone in the building. Someone's got to know him."

I took a taxi uptown and was in the Hilton lobby when Sam Borden arrived, accompanied by a tall, languid woman who'd seen better days. "This is Judith," he announced. "My former wife and Melanie's mother." He added, "Judith Hotchkiss now."

"Al Darlan," I said, shaking her hand.

"Where is Melanie?" she asked at once. "Is she all right?"

Two questions I couldn't answer! "I've located her apartment and her college roommate, Liza Truman. But there's been an unfortunate complication. A man was found dead in her apartment."

"What?" Borden's voice was a savage growl. "What are you trying to tell us, Darlan?"

"A man is dead and your daughter is missing. That's all we know. He was murdered, shot in the chest."

"Are you saying Melanie might have shot him?" Judith Hotchkiss asked.

"We don't know anything at this point, not even the victim's name. But Detective Phillips has asked me to bring you down to her apartment, to look over its contents. Could you do that?"

"Anything that'll help find Melanie," her mother said.

They checked their bags at the desk and followed me out to the cab stand. I explained that the police were trying to determine if the dead man had been living with her.

Borden asked, "Was it the man she was going to marry tonight?"

"We don't know that. We won't know till we find your daughter."

The taxi deposited us at the Broadway address. Only one police car remained in front. I held the outside door open for Borden and his ex-wife. The inner door had been propped open, probably from when they removed the body, and the parents walked through it to the elevator without glancing right or left.

"Is the body still there?" Judith Hotchkiss asked as her ex-husband pressed the fourth-floor button.

"No, it'll be gone by now," I told her.

Detective Phillips was waiting at the door while one of his men took a few final pictures inside. I introduced Borden and his ex-wife. "We have an alert out for your daughter," he said. "I understand she was to be married tomorrow evening?"

"That's what she posted on the Internet," her father said, "and that's why we're here. She left home last September and we haven't

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heard from her since."

"Take a look at the clothing in this closet," Phillips said. "Tell me if it's all hers."

Judith glanced through it, pulling a few hangers off the rack. "Some of these are hers, but she was living in New York. Naturally she'd have purchased new things."

"Her college roommate says she wanted to act."

"Liza? Is Liza here?"

"Right down the hall. I'll get her."

Liza Truman had exchanged the bathrobe for red shorts and a tank top. As soon as he saw her, Sam Borden moved in close. "Liza, what happened to Melanie?"

"I—I don't know."

"Who was the man who was killed here?"

"I don't know. He was hard to recognize with the blue paint."

Judith Hotchkiss gasped. "What blue paint?"

"The dead man was painted blue," Phillips explained. "We don't know why." He turned to Liza. "You'd better tell them what you told me about this wedding business."

She sighed and shook her head. "I told her not to post that clip on the Internet. She wasn't really getting married. It was a performance piece she planned for the Governors Island festival tomorrow. She and Pete were going to have a mock wedding ceremony dressed in outlandish costumes. She calls herself a performance artist now."

"Was Pete the dead man?" Borden asked.

"No, that wasn't Pete. I think it must be one of the guys who lives upstairs."

"Do you think my daughter killed the man?" Borden asked Phillips.

"I have to say she's a suspect, under the circumstances. He was killed in her apartment and she's missing."

"What is this thing on Governors Island?" I asked.

"An arts festival," Phillips answered. "The organizers are veterans of the annual Burning Man festival in Nevada and they're trying to start something similar in New York. These things usually mean drugs, so we'll be watching it."

It was Judith who spoke again. "My daughter would never take part in such a thing!"

"You haven't seen her in nearly a year," I reminded her. "People change fast, especially at that age."

While they continued to check through her clothing and possessions, I took Phillips aside. "Have you learned anything about the victim?"

"Not a thing. We're questioning all the tenants in the building but most of them are at work."

"Liza is probably right that he came from upstairs. None of his clothes seem to be in the apartment."

The detective nodded. "I agree he must reside here or be visiting

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someone here. Broadway is a busy street, day and night. Someone would certainly have spotted a nearly naked blue man."

"It's connected somehow with the so-called wedding and festival tomorrow," I decided. "I think that's where we'll find the missing bride."

I had dinner with Borden and his ex-wife at their hotel and promised to be out on Governors Island in the morning. But my day wasn't finished yet. By ten o'clock I was back at the Broadway address. Yellow police tape sealed Melanie's room, but I was more interested in talking to her college roommate.

Liza Truman buzzed me in and didn't seem surprised at my late evening arrival. "I expected I'd be hearing from you," she admitted as she held the door open for me. She was wearing the same red shorts, not yet ready for bed.

"It's better than talking to the police. Have you been in touch with Melanie?"

She hesitated and then nodded. "I reached her on her cell phone. She's with Pete."

"What's his full name?"

"Pete Jenkins, the groom in this mock wedding they're staging."

"Is she sleeping with him?"

My question seemed to surprise her. "Well, sure. That's why they're doing the wedding thing. She spent last night with him. I told her she better stay there tonight too because she can't get into her apartment."

"Doesn't she need some sort of wedding gown?"

"She has everything she needs, including Pete."

"Tell me who the dead man was. You must know. He had to be staying in this building."

"There are three guys on the fifth floor. He was one of them."

"Let's go see."

"The police already talked to them. They're probably asleep by now."

I shook my head. "Not at ten o'clock on a Friday night. Let's go."

She shrugged and led the way reluctantly into the hall to the stairwell door. The fifth floor was exactly like the fourth, with a row of metal doors, looking more like a college dorm than a Manhattan apartment building. I wondered what outrageous rent these kids were paying.

She rapped on the door to 509 and I could see a brief darkening at the door's peephole. "Open up!" Liza commanded. "It's me!"

The door swung open and a lanky young man with sparse chin whiskers and a tattoo on his right arm greeted us—or I should say Liza. She got a hug from him while I was pretty much ignored. As I followed her into the small apartment he asked, "This your dad?"

"No, silly! Does he look like me?"

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"I'm investigating the murder downstairs," I told him.

"Don't know anything about that," he insisted.

"This is Doug and that's Ned," she said. "Tony's not here."

"A young man about your age was killed downstairs, in Liza's room," I told them. "I think it was Tony."

"Yeah, we heard," Doug admitted. "The detective came around to all the apartments this morning."

"It's no good lying now," she told them. "That was Tony Marx's body down there." She turned to me and admitted, "He was to be their best man at the mock ceremony."

"We don't know a thing about it," Ned insisted, and they both stuck to their denials.

"Are you going to Melanie's wedding?" I asked.

"Sure. We'll be there."

"The ferry is free," Liza said, "but it only runs from eleven till five. Other times you have to come and go by water taxi. That's at pier 101 on the east side of the island, quite close to the festival site."

There was nothing more to be learned from Doug and Ned, so we went back down to Liza's apartment. "I'll be going out early," I said, "before Melanie's parents. I want you to come with me. You'd have the best chance of spotting her, whatever she's wearing and whatever her hair color is now."

Borden and Judith planned to be on the first ferry to the island, so Liza and I took an earlier water taxi at South Street Seaport. I'd paused only long enough to make a phone call.

"The city wants to develop Governors Island as a cultural center of some sort, which is why they're allowing this festival," Liza explained. "Melanie and Pete decided to do a mock wedding as a performance piece."

Even though the festival hadn't yet begun, the north part of the island was crammed with people. Artworks of all sorts were taking shape in a small park area between two rows of empty officers' homes from the old army base, many of them showing signs of neglect. In the shade of old oak trees a woman artist was assembling wire figures on stands, covering them with fabric until they began to take shape as a group of wild horses. Painted faces and bodies were very much in evidence, and the blue man would have fit in nicely if he were still alive. Further on, a group of city youths rehearsed an African dance routine they'd never learned in school. A giant inflatable starfish was attached to a tree, and a pair of young men in medieval costumes were practicing swordplay. There was a faint odor of pot in the air but not as much as I'd expected. Detective Phillips might have trouble making an arrest here today.

Suddenly Liza clutched my arm. "There's Pete Jenkins, the groom."

Jenkins was a handsome young man wearing a white Speedo and not much else. His hair had been greased into dozens of spikey

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points that gave him an unearthly aura, accentuated by a pair of small white wings glued to his shoulder blades. "Liza!" he called out. "I'm glad you came early."

"Where's your bride, Pete?"

"She's around somewhere, changing into her costume in one of the empty houses."

"Is she an angel, too?"

"Angel or devil. She hasn't decided which."

The first ferry of visitors arrived before we could find her, and I hurried back toward the dock to intercept Borden and his ex-wife. I could see immediately by his expression that Sam Borden wasn't about to approve of anything he saw. I reminded him that the so-called wedding was a performance piece and not real.

That did little to soothe Borden's anger. "Some of these people are running around half naked!" he blustered. "Where's my daughter?"

"We haven't located her, but she's on the island somewhere." I said a silent prayer that she hadn't chosen the devil costume over the angel.

But I had one more worry. The last passengers were coming off the ferry and I saw Detective Phillips among them. He had a couple of men with him and they were all business. I just wasn't sure whether they were after a murderer or some low-level pot dealer. Judith saw me looking back and she spotted them too. "Sam, the police are following us."

He glanced quickly around, looking for someplace to vent his anger, but I tried to calm him down. "They're not following you. They're trying to find a killer."

I stood at the center of the festival, trying to ignore the growing crowd of art lovers, some costumed and others nearly nude. A small stage at one end of the area boasted a rock band that kept things lively. One reveler, dressed as a circus ringmaster, wielded his whip over a mermaid-like figure. I saw Pete Jenkins moving through the crowd in search of his pseudo bride, but there was no sign of anyone in even the most imaginative of bridal (or devil) wear. I stared at the twin rows of former officers' homes. There were twenty in all, with the largest, at the north end, obviously reserved for the post commander. Revelers were already loitering on some of the porches.

Liza Truman joined us and I asked about Melanie. "I haven't seen her," she told me.

A sudden thought struck me. "Liza, if your friend Tony was to be best man, there must be a maid of honor, too. That would likely be you, Melanie's college roommate."

"I don't—" She stopped and gestured toward the blouse and shorts she was wearing. "Does this look like a maid of honor's dress, even for a mock wedding?"

"No, you didn't get dressed up because you knew there'd be no best man. Tony was dead."

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She hung her head. "I guess so, yeah."

"Who killed him? Doug? Ned?"

"I swear I don't know!"

Groups of painted people arrived carrying bizarre art objects, and the rock group shifted into some songs I actually remembered. "But you let the blue guy into her apartment, didn't you? You were the one with the extra key, and no key was found with the body. I doubt if Melanie was passing out keys to everyone she knew. She might have let him in herself, but that would make her the likely killer. I don't buy that. If she was defending herself from an attack she wouldn't have fled the scene."

"You're right," she admitted. "I let him in. I knew Melanie had spent the night with Pete, but I thought she'd be coming back. Tony wanted to surprise her with his costume."

"The night before their wedding?"

"They weren't getting married. It was a performance. They were to start off nearly nude and gradually dress themselves in wedding garments. Melanie had composed some special music to accompany the performance. The best man would be painted blue and I'd be painted pink, like babies."

"Where is Melanie now?"

"I swear I don't know. Probably in one of these houses. I told her on the phone last night that Tony was dead. She might cancel the entire performance. The city had already told her she couldn't do it in the evening, that the festival had to end at five."

Borden and Judith were standing a short distance away, scanning the crowd for their daughter. I looked up and down the rows of abandoned houses and suddenly I knew where we'd find her. "Come on!" I told Liza.

"Where are we going?" Liza asked.

"The houses are all numbered. Where else would she be today but in house number seven?"

It was about halfway down the row on the east side of the festival, a white two-story place that might once have been home to a captain or major and his family. The numeral 7 was still intact on the newel post by the front steps, but the steps themselves were worn and tacky. The white paint was starting to peel from the outside and though its downstairs windows were boarded up, the front door was slightly ajar, making it clear someone was in there.

I went ahead, swinging the door open, and saw Pete already there. "Melanie!" I called out. "We're friends. Liza is with me."

She appeared almost at once, wearing a white bikini with little angel wings that matched Pete's. "Who are you?" she demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"Your father hired me to find you," I told her. "And I guess I have."

Liza spoke up from behind me. "Your folks are on the island looking for you."

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She took a deep breath. "The performance is off, Liza. I was going to try it without you and Tony, but with them here I could never get through it. My father would yank me off the stage."

The door behind us opened and I saw Melanie's eyes grow wide with fear. I realized that her parents had followed us into number seven. "Daddy, please—"

I turned and saw the pistol in his hand. "Don't do it, Borden," I warned, but I doubt if he even saw me. He raised the gun and pointed it at the bridegroom with his pure white wings. That was when I shot him in the hand.

Detective Phillips and his men came as soon as they heard the shot, and I helped bandage Borden's hand until they could get him to the hospital. Judith quickly took charge of her nearly hysterical daughter. I was left to explain it all to the police.

"I knew Sam Borden was a strict father," I told Phillips while Liza and Jenkins tried to recover from their shock. "He was going to bring his daughter home when I found her and no one, not even a boyfriend, could stop him. When I took them to that building yesterday morning, Borden walked through the lobby without even a glance at the mailboxes, and when he entered the elevator he immediately pressed the fourth-floor button, though I hadn't mentioned her floor number. I had told him she was in the same building as her college roommate, though, and that address was listed in the phone book. He would have spotted *B. Melanie* on the mailbox and gone up to her room. Liza had let Tony Marx into the room earlier. When he opened the door it wasn't to Melanie. She'd have had her own key. It was her father and he had a gun. When he found a nearly naked blue man in his daughter's apartment, nothing Tony said would have calmed his fury. He killed the young man with a single shot and left him there."

"But he flew in with Melanie's mother, didn't he?" Liza asked.

"He told me he'd be on the flight arriving just ahead of hers, but I phoned someone at the airline this morning and confirmed that he actually arrived late Thursday night. After he killed Tony Marx he simply returned to the airport with his bag and met Judith in the lobby as if he'd arrived moments earlier."

"How'd he get the gun through security?" Phillips wanted to know.

"Packed in his checked luggage, probably disassembled and hidden in those lead-lined bags for photo equipment."

I drove home the next day, knowing I wouldn't be collecting the remainder of my fee from Sam Borden, even though I'd found his wandering daughter. ●

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The Best Suit

by Peter Lovesey

Around the time this issue goes to subscribers, Peter Lovesey will be receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Malice Domestic Convention. It is not his first such award: In 2000 he received CWA's Cartier Diamond Dagger for Lifetime Achievement. He is a favorite at *EQMM*, a past winner of our Readers Award. "The Best Suit" will also appear in the April '08 collection *Murder on the Short List* from Crippen & Landru. ¶

She was a talkative redhead and he couldn't hear a thing she was saying. Night clubs aren't places for conversation. Her mouth moved, sometimes making words, sometimes smiling. But it didn't matter. She'd moved in so close as she danced that her breasts kept touching him. Herbie tried to look cooler than he felt. He wasn't used to women coming on to him. He was forty-three, paunchy, and five foot four. He wasn't even a regular clubber. He was there with about sixty other friends of Paddy, one of the regulars at his local. Paddy had decided to celebrate his fortieth in style.

After twenty minutes, the strain got to be too much, and Herbie gestured that it might be time for a drink. The woman nodded and reached for his hand and they threaded a route to the bar. Even there it was difficult to talk without shouting, so he suggested finding a pub outside. But when they were in the street she said, "You're coming to my place. It's only a short walk."

Herbie didn't argue.

Her place was a two-story house on Richmond Hill with a spectacular view of the lights reflected in the river. This was one classy lady. She handed him a bottle and told him to open it while she changed into something more relaxing. "I hope you're not a connoisseur," she said.

"What do you mean?" he said. "This is vintage bubbly."

"It isn't chilled."

"No problem." He popped the cork and filled two tall glasses.

"Tell me about yourself," she said when she came back in a red silk kimono. "What do you do for a living?"

"This and that." He didn't want to say he was unemployed. He'd been made redundant in April. "How about you?"

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"I'm an entrepreneur."

Herbie wished he'd said he was an entrepreneur. It sounded better than "this and that." "Cheers."

They touched glasses and drank.

"You're not married?" she asked.

"Divorced."

"Want to come to bed with me?"

"Try and stop me," Herbie said, and it seemed a smart answer.

But she said, "Yes, I will."

He wasn't sure if he'd heard right. "What—stop me?"

"I'm not ready yet."

"So why did you mention it?"

"I wanted to make sure you fancy me. Relax. It's not a total no-no."

"Why invite me back and open a bottle if you're not in the mood?"

"I said relax." She reached for a remote and switched on Billie Holiday. "I don't even know your name yet."

He told her.

She said, "I'm Chloe. What's your taste in music?"

They talked jazz for a while, but Herbie's mind was about ten percent involved. He was trying to understand why she'd invited him back and gone cold on him.

Then he had his answer. The door behind him opened and a man in a dark suit strolled in, as calm as the manager in a shoe shop except that he looked like a state executioner. Chloe wasn't fazed. She said, "What do you think?" And it was obvious she was speaking to the man, not Herbie.

The man took a long look at Herbie and said, "Turn your head."

This was so unexpected that Herbie did as he was told.

The man said, "He'll do."

Chloe said, "I knew you'd agree." Turning back to Herbie, she said, "I told him you were amazing."

Herbie had been called many things in his time. Amazing wasn't one of them. "What's going on?" he asked, not liking this at all.

The man said to Chloe, "You tell him. I'm off." He crossed the room to the main door and let himself out.

"Did I dream that?" Herbie asked.

"Brady's all right. He was giving me a second opinion."

"What for?"

"Don't worry. You passed. Want to make five grand and get an Armani suit for nothing?"

"I don't get you."

"You might . . . if you play your cards right." She widened her eyes a fraction.

"I don't follow any of this."

"That's the beauty, Herbie. You don't need to. If you're bright—and I know you are—you take what's on offer and ask no questions."

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"Is it legal?"

"There you go—another question."

"I need to know what I'm getting into."

"No one's asking you to hold up a bank."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing, except be yourself."

"For five grand?"

"And a designer suit. And a date with me."

"Tonight, you mean?"

"You don't give up, do you? Tomorrow, you go for a fitting at the Armani shop in Knightsbridge. It's important you look right. Did I say you also get a shirt and tie and shoes? A dark shirt and a white tie."

"Who's paying for all this?"

"Not you. I'll meet you in Sloane Street. You get the first payment of a thousand pounds just for turning up. Would two-thirty do?"

"I suppose."

"Do you want me to call a taxi?"

"Now?"

She nodded. He'd already concluded he wouldn't get lucky tonight. No bad thing. He'd lost most of his confidence when the man called Brady appeared from nowhere.

"I'll walk."

On the way home, he went over everything in his mind. Five grand *and* all the clothes. There had to be a catch. She'd said he wouldn't be asked to rob a bank, but what other scam could she be planning? In the club he'd got the impression she fancied him. What had happened later suggested another scenario. It seemed as if he'd been earmarked for a job. Chloe had brought him to the house to be vetted by Brady. Maybe she, or others, had been watching him before he ever set foot in the club.

She hadn't asked him to do anything illegal. What could he lose by going along to Knightsbridge tomorrow?

She stepped out of a silver Porsche the minute he arrived in Sloane Street. He couldn't see who was driving before it moved off.

"Let's get you suited," she said, taking his arm. She was in a white leather coat and red shoes with amazing high heels.

He wasn't used to shopping in Knightsbridge. The assistant showed them to a sofa and brought coffee and biscuits before any business was done. Then they were handed a book of designs. Herbie was measured and they looked at cloths.

Chloe made all the choices. She had a clear idea of what would look best. She also picked the shirt, the tie, the shoes, and the socks. The suit would be ready on Friday.

"That will do," she said to the salesman, "and this is my treat, so

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I'll settle for everything now." While the bill was being prepared she took a wad of fifty-pound notes from her bag and handed it to Herbie. "The first thou, as promised. You don't need to count it. Put it in your pocket and don't get mugged on the way home."

"What happens next?" he asked.

"You come back for a fitting in about a week and then you collect the suit when they tell you."

"Will you be here?"

She laughed: "You're a big boy. You can manage without me."

"So what happens after?"

"You have a mobile?"

He told her the number and she stored it in her phone.

"I'll be in touch," she said. "Don't lose any sleep. When it comes, it'll be your benefit night." She was texting as she spoke. "To my driver," she explained.

As they left the shop, the Porsche pulled up outside. She kissed Herbie lightly on the lips before getting in. "See you soon, Herbie."

He hailed a taxi. He wasn't returning in the tube. He was in a bigger league now with his boxes of new clothes and a grand in his pocket.

In under two weeks the suit was ready. Superb. No one would have known he had a paunch. He was tempted to wear it to the pub, just to get a reaction from Paddy and the others, but he decided against it. They'd demand an explanation and he didn't want to tell them the truth of it. Those yobs wouldn't understand why he hadn't spent the night with Chloe. He'd be a laughing-stock. And if he told them about the money, they'd insist on drinks all round for the rest of the evening. Anyway, this adventure wasn't over yet. Chloe had promised him a benefit night.

He heard nothing else for ten days. The suit waited in his wardrobe in its zipped cover. He'd unpacked the shirt and it was on a hanger next to the suit. He was beginning to arrive at an understanding of that strange evening at the night club—how a classy lady like Chloe must have been attracted by his chunky physique and rhythmic movement in the strobe lighting and then a touch disappointed by his Chelsea FC shirt and blue jeans when she got him home. Clearly she liked formality in her men.

He'd pushed to the back of his mind the sinister Brady, who'd looked him over and said he would do. In Herbie's eyes the night-club episode had been all about Chloe and her taste in men.

The call came early on a Thursday morning when Herbie was walking back from collecting his paper and milk at the corner shop. Chloe's sexy voice was unmistakable. "Hi, Herbie. Are you up for it today?"

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"Try me."

"Do you know the Black Bess in Hounslow?"

"I've heard of it." But not in a good connection, a little voice said inside his head.

"Be there at nine-thirty sharp tonight."

"In the gear?"

"Of course. Take a taxi. I'll be inside with some friends. Walk in and kiss me on the lips and take a seat beside me. Someone will bring you a Diet Coke. That's what you drink, right?"

"Actually, I drink bitter."

"Tonight you're on Diet Coke. Everyone will treat you with respect, but you have to conduct yourself with dignity. At the end of the evening you get your reward."

"I'm not much good in company."

"Stay quiet then. Let the others do the talking."

The suit made him feel like a movie star. He looked in the mirror and winked. Benefit night. He dabbed on some of his favourite aftershave.

He took the taxi as instructed. The Black Bess was a large pub in Hounslow High Street with an ornate Victorian exterior and a sign with a masked Dick Turpin galloping his famous horse. Maybe the idea of highway robbery had been the reason Herbie had been troubled when the pub was mentioned. He paid the driver, checked his watch, took a deep breath, and went in. There was loud music and the yeasty smell of beer. He looked for Chloe and spotted her with some people at a table to his right. She had her back to him. He strolled over, rested a hand on her shoulder, leaned down, and kissed her on the lips.

She said just for his ears, "What are you wearing?"

He said, "The things we bought."

"The aftershave. It's cheap. Wash it off at the first opportunity."

The group had suspended whatever had been under discussion. They eyed Herbie with what seemed to be respect, even awe. One of them, he was disturbed to see, was Brady. Those cold eyes locked briefly with Herbie's. Chloe said, "We left a chair for you."

Herbie noticed it was a better chair than anyone else's. He sat and drummed his fingers on the arms. One of the men (there were four altogether, all in good suits, and two women in black spaghetti-strap dresses) said, "What's your poison?"

Herbie twitched. His nerves were getting to him.

"What are you drinking?"

"A pint of—" Herbie had to correct himself. "No, a Diet Coke."

Brady snapped his fingers. The barmaid was watching, poised for the summons, and came over to the group. A fresh round of drinks was ordered. The others were drinking beer and vodka martinis. Herbie was envious but said nothing.

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Chloe said to the others, "Well—what do you think of my discovery?"

Herbie came under full scrutiny again.

One of the men said, "You could have fooled me."

The second woman said, "It's uncanny."

The man nearest to him said, "He's good. He's very good. But something isn't right."

Thinking of the aftershave, Herbie said, "Which way is the gents?"

The woman said, "Even the voice is spot on."

Brady said, "I'll show you."

Two of them accompanied him. He felt as if he had minders, especially when neither of them used the facilities. He rinsed his face and used the dryer. On the way back to the table, Brady said, "Relax. We know who you are."

But relaxing was difficult. The next two hours went slowly. The others talked among themselves about football and television, told a few jokes, ordered more drinks, and did a lot of laughing. Brady took a few pictures with a digital camera. Herbie followed instructions and stayed quiet and sipped his Diet Coke, but it was a strain. He knew some better jokes than they did. He glanced a few times at Chloe to see if she'd forgiven him for the aftershave. He couldn't be certain.

Finally Chloe said, "It's eleven-thirty, everyone."

They got up to leave.

Then a camera flashed. Someone who had been drinking at the bar had moved in and sneaked a picture. Immediately Brady grabbed the man and pinned him to the wall. Chloe said to Herbie, "Keep walking. He'll deal with it."

The group reassembled outside the pub. Herbie wondered if he was going home with Chloe, but that didn't seem to be in the plan. She said, "I've arranged for you to be driven home in the Porsche. You'll find your pay on the backseat. If we need you again I'll be in touch."

"Is that it?"

"For tonight, yes. You did a good job."

"I'd like to see you again."

She said in a low voice, "Don't push it, Herbie."

The Porsche drew up and Herbie got in. As promised, an envelope stuffed with fifty-pound notes was on the backseat. He tried to be philosophical and let the money cushion his frustration.

Back in his comfortable jeans and Chelsea shirt next day, he could hardly believe his strange experience. But the four grand in his top drawer was real and so was the suit hanging in his wardrobe. He decided to treat himself to an early beer at his local. The barman held the fifty-pound note to the light to look for the watermark, just as Herbie had done when he took it from the packet. It was kosher.

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The pub was quiet. Just a couple of pensioners playing crib and one of the regulars picking horses from a paper. He'd discarded the inside pages, so Herbie picked them up to see what was happening in the world.

Not much. Another drug scandal involving a pop star. A feature on violence in the classroom.

Then he turned a page and saw a large picture of himself wearing his Armani suit. The caption, in large letters, was OUT. With heart pounding, he read the story underneath.

> Spotted last night in his favourite haunt, the Black Bess in Hounslow, Jimmy "The Suit" Calhoun. The feared king of West London's underworld was released this week after a three-year stretch in Pentonville for the injuries inflicted on "Weasel" Mercer, leader of a rival gang in Chelsea. One of Mercer's ears was slashed off with a cut-throat razor said to have been wielded by Calhoun himself in the fracas behind Stamford Bridge in 2005. Our crime correspondent, Phil Kingston, writes that Calhoun's reappearance will be viewed in some quarters as a declaration of intent, considering that Mercer has taken over much of his territory in the three years since. Nicknamed The Suit for his taste in expensive clothes, Calhoun was alleged to be making millions in protection, "putting the arm" on pubs, betting shops, and restaurants south of the river, but his funds were never traced. A police source said Scotland Yard will deal vigorously with any revival of the out and out gang warfare of the recent past.

Herbie dropped the paper. No question: The picture was of him. It hadn't been Jimmy Calhoun in the Black Bess last night. It had been Herbie Collins. How could they get it so wrong?

He was shaking. He turned the paper over so that no one else would see the picture, thinking as he did so that he couldn't stop a million other readers from seeing it. He picked up his glass and had to grip it with both hands. People were going to think he was an underworld king, a vicious hoodlum who'd slashed off another man's ear and been locked away for three years. He could ask the paper to print a correction, he supposed, but really the damage to his reputation was done.

With a sense of doom he pieced together the clues that made sense of this. The people in the Black Bess had looked at him in his suit and made comments like "uncanny" and "you could have fooled me." They'd stared at him in a way he'd never experienced before, and the explanation could only be that he resembled the real Jimmy Calhoun. Everyone is supposed to have a double somewhere in the world. His, unfortunately, happened to be the most vicious man in London.

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His thoughts moved on to Chloe. It was hard to credit that such a stunningly attractive woman should have got into bad company—the worst, in fact. Clearly she felt some loyalty to Calhoun or she wouldn't be working for him. Herbie could only suppose money had been the turn-on. Money and power are said to be irresistible to women. She'd gone to all the trouble of seeking out a double, someone to take the risk of sitting in that pub with the rest of Calhoun's henchmen, symbolically reclaiming his manor, an act of provocation that could have resulted in death.

Herbie shuddered. Good thing he hadn't been aware how dangerous it was.

Still, he'd carried it off, and carried off five grand and the Armani suit. Pity he hadn't carried off Chloe as well, but that would have been pushing it, as she had pointed out.

Three weeks passed and he heard no more from Chloe. He supposed he'd served his purpose and been taken off the payroll. The trouble was that he couldn't get Chloe out of his mind. She was a lovely, misguided woman seduced by money and power, he'd convinced himself. How could she respect Calhoun after he'd behaved in such a cowardly fashion, letting someone else double for him and risk being killed?

He'd thrown away the aftershave she'd called cheap. What a fool he'd been to use it. He ought to have expected such a classy woman to know it was third-rate.

Thinking about her constantly, he went to Harrods and purchased an aftershave that cost sixty pounds. It was called *Je t'adore*. He also bought a new tie, pure silk, by Galliano.

That evening, in what he now thought of as his slob clothes, the jeans and the Chelsea shirt, he was in his local with Paddy and the others watching football on the big-screen TV and trying to forget Chloe. At half-time there was a short news bulletin. None of them paid much attention. Herbie only caught the item when it was almost through:

". . . are treating it as a gangland killing. Mercer, known as The Weasel, had become increasingly powerful in recent years and taken over much of the so-called empire formerly run by Jimmy 'The Suit' Calhoun, who was released from prison last month after serving three years for grievous bodily harm. Calhoun's present whereabouts are unknown."

Herbie didn't stay for the second half. He told the others he was meeting a friend.

At home he turned on the ten-thirty news and got the full story. Someone had pumped two bullets into Mercer's head in a barber's shop in Fulham. The killer had made his escape in a silver Porsche.

Herbie's first reaction was immense relief. He'd not felt safe

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since his picture had been in the paper. It had been no fun walking the streets of West London wondering if one of The Weasel's mob would mistake him for Calhoun. The killing of The Weasel had to be good news.

But it wasn't.

The more Herbie pondered the changed situation, the more alarming it became. The Weasel was dead, but his people weren't going to disband. Gang warfare had broken out. Anyone with a resemblance to Calhoun was in mortal danger.

Moreover, as the TV news had strongly hinted, Calhoun was the obvious suspect for the murder of The Weasel. Every copper in London would be on the lookout.

His situation was perilous.

He decided he needed protection. He was entitled to it. After all, he hadn't asked to become involved with Calhoun's mob. They'd press-ganged him. To put it better, he'd been snared in a honey trap.

Okay, they'd paid him good money, but they hadn't told him his life was on the line. They had to understand the consequences of their actions. He didn't have much confidence in approaching them, but he reckoned if he could appeal to Chloe's conscience she might have some influence. After all, she'd hinted at more than just monetary rewards. He still believed she fancied him.

He waited till after dark the next evening, when he felt safer out on the streets. He would have taken a taxi, but he didn't know Chloe's address except that it had been somewhere on Richmond Hill. He'd decided to walk, wearing the suit and the new tie and the *Je t'adore.*

The house was higher up the steep hill than he remembered. He'd been on cloud nine when he'd come here before. Tonight the place seemed to be in darkness. He hoped she was home. As he opened the gate and walked up the small path towards the porch a pair of coach lamps came on and a security light dazzled him.

A voice at his side said, "What do you want?"

He turned to find himself almost nose to nose with the scary Brady.

Should have realised Chloe's house would be under guard, he thought. "I, em—"

Brady cut in, his tone and manner transformed. "It's you, boss. Sorry. Didn't expect you so early."

The new tie, the artificial light, or the unscheduled appearance. Whatever it was, Brady himself had fallen for it.

Herbie shrugged and smoothly got into character. "Make yourself useful and let me in. Is she home?"

"Yes, boss." Brady produced a key and opened the door.

Herbie stepped inside. "See we're not disturbed."

"You bet." The door closed.

Chloe's voice called out, "Who's there?"

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"It's okay," Herbie called back. "It's me."

"Hey, what a wonderful surprise!" She came into the hall and hugged him. Then she stood back and smoothed her hand under his tie. "This is new. Cool. And you smell so nice. Someone knows how to turn a girl on."

He'd been rehearsing a little speech about the dangers he was in now that The Weasel had been murdered, but it would have to wait. Chloe was still holding his tie, loosening it. She said, "Shall we go upstairs?"

Herbie said, "Why not?"

And that was how he finally got his benefit night. Deceitful? Yes. Unforgivable? No. Not in the light of what happened. Two or three times she said, "You're amazing. They should lock you up more often. I swear you're bigger than ever."

He said, "It's because of you. So amazing. I've waited so long for this." He was coming to his third climax when there was a bang like a car backfiring.

Chloe said, "Was that in my head, or did you hear it, too?"

"It was out in the street."

"Yes. Hold me closer, Jimmy. Don't stop."

He didn't, but he felt compelled to say, "Actually, I'm Herbie."

She was crying out in ecstasy.

Finally the moment passed and she said, "You were kidding, of course."

"No." He paused. "I did say I'd like to see you again."

He was prepared for the backlash and he deserved it. But she said nothing to him. Instead she reached for the phone at her bedside and pressed one of the buttons. "Brady, was that a gun going off just now?"

Herbie was so close that he heard every word of Brady's answer.

"It's okay, Chloe. I dealt with it."

"What was it?"

"Only that little runt we used as a double. He tried to get past me, making out he was the boss, so I totaled him."

"Oh my God! Killed him?"

"Put one through his head. No problem. He was a nobody. I'll take care of the body."

She put down the phone. She had her hand to her mouth. "The dumbass shot Jimmy. We're all finished."

"I'm not finished," Herbie said. "But I could have been. Seems to me I've had a lucky escape."

"We were all on his payroll."

"Do you know where he kept the money?"

"Various accounts under other names."

"You have the details?"

"I know where to look for them. But Jimmy always collected the cash in person."

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Herbie folded his arms and grinned. "Then it looks as if you're going to need my help."

There was a long pause. Chloe's eyes widened. "Would you?"

"No one else needs to know he's gone," Herbie said. "Not even Brady. Let him carry on thinking he murdered me. I'll feel safer that way."

"You'll have to practise the signatures he used."

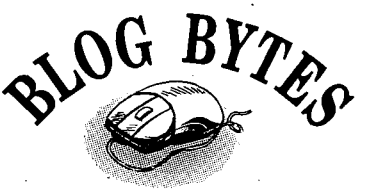
"I can do that."

"And if you're going to carry this off, you'll have to take over his life."

"And all that goes with it," Herbie said, stretching his limbs.

The police never succeeded in solving the murder of The Weasel, or the disappearance of Herbie Collins. But they earned some praise when the crime rate in West London dipped dramatically. The Calhoun gang seemed to have lost interest in armed robberies and protection rackets. The probation service said it spoke volumes for prison as a instrument of reform.

Herbie moved in with Chloe and found no difficulty adapting to the lifestyle of a millionaire ex-crook. On a Saturday he was often seen in the directors' box at Chelsea and he'd pass the evenings in the Black Bess with his new friends. The nights were always spent with Chloe and the last thing she would whisper to him before falling asleep was always, "You're the best Suit." ●



by Bill Crider

As I've no doubt said before, the world of blogs is one of constant change. Almost as soon as I recommended Bill Peschel's *Reader's Almanac* **(http://www.planetpeschel.com/index)**, it disappeared. And almost as soon as you read about its disappearance in this column, it returned. So you can once again check each day for the important births and deaths that occurred on that date, and there's always a writing-related quotation, as well.

A new blog worth your attention is August West's *Vintage Hardboiled Reads* **(http://vinpulp.blogspot.com)**, which presents reviews of, well, vintage hardboiled reads. Recent ones include Jonathan Craig's *Renegade Cop* (1954), Harry Whittington's short story "Flight to Nowhere" (from a 1953 issue of *Male*), and *The Convertible Hearse* (1957) by Bill Gault. Each review is complemented by a cover scan. This is a blog that I hope will be around for a long time.

Victor Gischler's *Gun Monkeys* was nominated for an **(cont. p. 85)**

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Art by Mark Evans

CRUEL AND UNUSUAL

by Clark Howard

Loretta Rudd made the decision that would eventually kill her when she was just eighteen years old, a senior getting ready to graduate from a small high school outside the rural county seat of Nowers County, which was derisively referred to as "Nowheres" County.

The decision that Loretta made was to tell the boy that she loved, and who loved her, that she had decided to marry someone else. The boy who loved her, a senior at another high school in a neighboring county, had met Loretta at a Friday-night football game between the two schools three years earlier when they were both ftfteen; they had been going steady ever since, and had become cautiously intimate. When she told him of her decision, he was stunned.

"You're not serious," he said, half thinking, hoping, it was a joke of some kind. "Tell me you're just kidding, Retta." He was the only one in her life who ever called her "Retta."

"I'm very serious," Loretta declared. "I've been seeing Carter Graham while you were away at ROTC camp. And he's asked me to marry him."

Carter Graham, then completing his third year at an elite private university, had been home on spring break. He was a local rich kid, the only son in a family that owned half of Nowers County and had every

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acre of it planted in soybeans.

"I'm sorry," Loretta said, and did seem sincerely so, "but I'm tired of being a small-town girl in nowheres, from a nowheres family, going nowheres. Carter's got one more year of college and then he'll go into his father's business and we'll live in a big house up on The Hill with plenty of money for anything I want." The Hill was an exclusive conclave where only the six wealthy families in the county lived.

"But I thought we were going to move to Memphis or Atlanta or someplace after we graduated," her spurned young lover tried to reason. "I thought we were going to find us a place to live, and jobs—"

"Find what kind of place to live?" she challenged. "A tacky little furnished apartment? And what kind of jobs? Me a waitress and you a delivery man or something? No thank you." She put a hand on his bare chest, one of the last times she would touch him intimately. "I'm sorry, baby. I just can't."

"But, Retta, that would just be a start." He was pleading now. "We could both go to night school, eventually get degrees in something—"

"Eventually! When? Seven or eight years from now? Ten?"

"Retta, sweetheart—"

"No! I've made up my mind. I just can't stand being poor any longer." She took her hand away from his chest. An ant crawled across his arm. He started to slap it, but Loretta stopped his hand and flicked the ant away with one finger. "I'm sorry for doing this to you, sweetheart, truly I am. But I've got to do it." She kissed him briefly on the lips, the kiss salty with tears both hers and his. "You'll get over me, sugar. I know you will. Just wait and see—"

A writer who's a better researcher than Clark Howard would be hard to find. The five-time Readers Award winner is always lacing his stories with interesting facts and often, as here, sets them against the background of contemporary issues. Perhaps he's drawing on skills developed in his complementary career as a top author of true crime.

Robert McWade, the state director of corrections, was just finishing breakfast when the phone rang and a moment later Delia, his housekeeper, brought him a portable handset.

"It's the governor, Mr. Bobby," she said.

McWade swallowed his coffee, took the phone, and said, "Good morning, sir."

"I thought you and I had agreed that you were to call me Grant," said the voice of Governor Grant Marlow.

"That's only when we're drinking together," McWade said. "In private."

"After all the years we've been friends, after you helped me cheat my way through our freshman year in college copying *your* notes,

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how would you like it if I started calling you 'Mr. Director'?"

"You're the governor, you can call me anything you want to."

"You're a hard-head, Bobby McWade," the governor said. "Listen, come over to my office, will you? Fred Willis and Art Meadows are going to join us. We've just received a federal court order to stay the Carter Graham execution."

McWade frowned. Fred Willis was the state attorney general, Arthur Meadows the state surgeon general. "Stay it on what grounds?" he asked.

"I'll tell you when you get here," Marlow said. "Hustle on over."

As he turned off the handset, the frown on Robert McWade's face morphed into an expression of perplexity. What possible basis could a federal court have used to stay Carter Graham's execution? In the three years since the condemned man had been convicted of beating his wife, Loretta Rudd Graham, unconscious with a hammer, then putting her in the Tuskey River with a spare tire tied to her ankles, his case had been appealed to, and rejected by, the state supreme court, the federal district court, the federal court of appeals, and the U.S. Supreme Court. Every possible appellate avenue had been explored and denied. And Governor Grant Marlow had declined to commute the wealthy landowner's sentence to life imprisonment because of the heinous nature of the murder: An autopsy had shown water in the victim's lungs, indicating that she had been drowned. Loretta Rudd Graham had still been alive when her husband had dumped her in the Tuskey River with that tire tied to her ankles.

Carter Graham, at present on Death Row in Parmalee State Prison, was due to be executed by lethal injection in just three days.

Now that proceeding apparently was off.

Grant Marlow, at forty-six, with a good firm chin, a full head of attractively graying hair, a wryly engaging smile, and a photographic memory of names, faces, and places, was the perfect image of a governor, someday a United States senator, possibly even a President of the United States. He was currently in his seventh year as governor, and firmly believed the Senate and the White House to be in his future.

"Come in, boys, come in," he greeted his director of corrections, attorney general, and surgeon general, as McWade, Fred Willis, and Arthur Meadows came through the door. Willis had a distinctly sour expression on his face. He had been fighting Carter Graham's slick, expensive lawyers for three years, was within seventy-two hours of being done with it, and his expression communicated that he was not a happy camper.

When the three men were seated across from him, the governor said, "Okay, Freddie, give us the gory details."

Willis opened his briefcase and removed a four-page document stamped on each page with a U.S. District Court seal. "It's a new approach to the cruel-and-unusual-punishment appeal," he said.

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McWade groaned. "That's been up and down the court ladder dozens of times in dozens of states. I thought the law was settled on that issue."

"Generally it is," said Willis. "But now a new twist has been added to it. The appeal doesn't contend that lethal injection itself is cruel and unusual; it contends that the *method* being used to execute a person by lethal injection is cruel and unusual."

Both the governor and McWade shook their heads in confusion. Meadows, the surgeon general, merely raised his eyebrows in curiosity.

"I don't understand," the governor said.

"Neither do I," McWade agreed. "What's the difference?"

Willis shrugged. "I don't really see a difference myself," he admitted. "But the district court made a distinction. Basically, what Graham's lawyers are contending, and what the court is agreeing to, is that there's no way to tell whether a person being executed by lethal injection can feel any *pain* between the time the first drug, the sedative, puts him to sleep, and the time the second drug paralyzes his body, and the third drug stops his heart. They say that the current administration of the drugs leaves open the possibility that the condemned man is conscious of what's happening, realizes what's being done to his body, and therefore suffers an agonizing death—which is cruel and unusual. One of the points they make for this possibility is that the condemned man may have a strong enough constitution to subconsciously resist the drug being used to put him to sleep."

"That's ridiculous," McWade said. He turned to Arthur Meadows. "What about it, Art?"

The surgeon general shrugged. "In *theory*," he admitted, "that could be true. In *practice,* however, I'd say it was impossible." Rising, the doctor paced the room for a moment, then turned as if facing an audience of medical students. "The first drug administered is sodium thiopental, known more commonly as sodium pentothal. It's a barbiturate that induces general anesthesia when administered intravenously. Very fast-working drug. It reaches effective clinical concentration in the brain within thirty seconds—"

"Which means?" the governor asked.

"Which means that it puts the person being injected into a state of unconsciousness in which that person is unaware of what is happening, is pain-free, is completely immobile, and will have no memory of the period of time during which the anesthesia lasts."

"Go on," Governor Marlow said, nodding.

"For surgical procedures, patients are given a dose of one hundred to one hundred fifty milligrams over a period of ten to fifteen seconds. For executions, in our state, a dose of two *grams* is administered. That amounts to two *thousand* milligrams. That dosage alone may be lethal, depending on the person's fat-solubility level and the individual brain's cell reactions to the drug."

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"Isn't there a way to measure the effect the drug has on a particular individual?" McWade asked.

"To some degree. That's the job of an anesthesiologist—but, of course, medical ethics prohibit anesthesiologists or any other medical doctors from *participating* in a legal execution. As you know, we have one of our state doctors there to pronounce the condemned person dead, but that's after it's all over. That's not considered participation in the execution itself."

"Isn't there any other way to measure the effect of the first drug?" the governor asked.

Arthur Meadows sighed quietly. "Let me answer this way. The brain is truly the most amazing organ in every living creature. Almost any form of life you can think of—birds, reptiles, fish, amphibians, mammals—all have brains. And the human brain is the most astonishing of them all. It gives us the power to think, speak, imagine, everything. It controls our body temperature, blood pressure, heart rate, ability to breathe. It accepts a vast flood of information from our eyes, ears, nose, sense of touch. It lets our body stand, sit, walk, talk. It lets us dream. Reason. Experience emotion. All of these tasks are coordinated, controlled, and regulated by an organ about the size of a small head of cauliflower." He slowly shook his head. "No, we'll never be able to tell for certain what anyone's brain feels in a given circumstance."

There was silence in the office for a long, solemn moment, each of the four men with his own secret, perhaps even fearful, thoughts. Then the governor broke the spell.

"All right. What do we do now?" His eyes settled on the attorney general. "Fred, how about it?"

Fred Willis shrugged. "We appeal to a higher federal court. That's all we *can* do."

"And if we lose there?"

Another shrug. "We go to the top: the U.S. Supreme Court. We won't lose there, I guarantee that."

Governor Marlow groaned. "If it goes that far again, we may be looking at years before we get a ruling this state can live with."

"Fred, isn't there *some* way," McWade asked, "that we can satisfy the lower court about this initial drug injection? Some way we can reasonably assure the court that the condemned man is so deeply unconscious that he won't feel *anything?*"

"I don't know," the attorney general admitted. "I have one idea—"

"Well, let's hear it," the governor said.

"All right. Under our present procedure, an electrocardiograph machine is connected to the condemned person and a flat-line monitor indicates when the heart stops and death occurs, after which our state doctor in attendance verifies that the person is dead. Now then, the federal court might—and I emphasize *might*—be impressed if we offered to also attach a brain-wave monitor of some

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kind to measure the activity of the brain before, during, and after the initial dose of sodium pentothal is injected, to ensure that the brain is receiving no pain signals."

"Can that be done?" the governor asked. He looked at his surgeon general. "Art?"

"An electroencephalograph machine could be used, I suppose," the surgeon general said. "What that does is measure the activity of brain neurons. See, the brain is made up of about a hundred billion nerve cells—neurons. They do all the gathering of information and transmitting of electrochemical signals in the body. As the sodium pentothal is injected, those neurons essentially take naps, and the brain-wave monitor reflects the diminishing activity that results."

"Is it reliable?" the governor asked.

"As reliable as any other method. A lot of things about the brain are still pretty much a mystery to us."

"But do you think the court would buy that?" McWade asked the attorney general.

"Art and I have discussed it. We think that, unless one of the judges is a neurologist, there's a fair chance they would. It only takes two of the three judges on the panel to lift the stay."

Grant Marlow rose from behind a stately mahogany desk that had once belonged to President Jefferson Davis of the Confederate States of America and walked over to gaze out a large picture window that overlooked the splendid grounds of the executive mansion. Somewhere deep in the recesses of his own brain lay the hope of someday looking out the windows of the Oval Office. After a long moment's reflection on his options, he turned back to his top advisors.

"Well, a fair chance of winning is better than no chance at all," he told his attorney general. "Can we get it done by Friday?"

"Maybe. I mean, it's possible."

"Then go for it," the governor ordered.

After the meeting, Grant Marlow asked McWade to stay behind.

"Lucy is expecting you for dinner tonight, Bobby. I hope you won't disappoint her."

McWade smiled wryly. "Is the lovely first lady playing matchmaker again?"

"If you're asking whether Rose Fuller will be there, the answer is yes." Rose Fuller was the governor's private secretary. A divorced, spousally abused woman several years younger than Bobby McWade, she was shapely, attractive, and intelligent, a longtime friend of Lucy Marlow, the governor's wife, who was convinced that she would be a perfect match for the lifelong bachelor McWade.

"Grant," McWade said patiently, "Rose and I are good friends, but I don't think she's any more anxious to get married again than I am to get married at all."

"That's not what Lucy thinks. She thinks that Rose is ready, will-

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ing, and able. Come on now, Bobby, you've got to admit she'd be quite a catch."

"That she would," McWade conceded. "If I was fishing." He sighed quietly. "Tell lovely Lucy I'll be there."

As McWade started to leave, the governor asked, "Incidentally, have you picked a replacement for Duval yet?"

"Not yet." Ross Duval was the warden at Parmalee State Prison, which held Death Row and the execution chamber.

"Any chance he'll reconsider his resignation?"

"I doubt it. It's a moral issue with him. He's opposed to capital punishment and since it was reinstated he's been required to personally push the buttons on four men. It's something he says he just can't live with any longer."

"Too bad. He's a good man." Marlow turned to some papers on his desk. "See you tonight, Bobby."

"You bet."

In the reception room to the governor's office, Rose Fuller occupied a desk similar to the governor's, somewhat smaller, but mahogany nevertheless, which had once belonged to Varina Howell Davis, wife of the Confederate president. The governor's desk and hers were the only two pieces of furniture rescued when Davis was forced to abandon the Confederate capitol in Richmond, Virginia, and move his headquarters farther south to Greensboro, South Carolina. The desks fell into Union hands when the Confederacy capitulated. Governor Grant Marlow's family purchased them at auction sometime later and he had ultimately inherited them. He had wanted his wife, Lucy, to have the desk that belonged to Varina Davis, but she insisted that the two remain a pair, so they followed her husband into the executive section of the governor's mansion.

Dropping into a chair next to Rose Fuller's desk, Bobby McWade said, "Let's pull a fast one on our boss and his marriage-broker wife and elope over the state line tonight."

"Lucy Marlow would never forgive us," Rose drawled in a husky voice that men seemed to find extremely provocative. "She has dedicated herself to finding me a new husband, and she looks upon you as a kind of wayward bachelor brother who is far too adept at avoiding matrimony to please her. She wants to hostess a wedding in the executive mansion so badly, I think she'd commit murder to do it."

"I guess your refusal to elope means we'll be having dinner with them tonight. Dress code?"

"Casual. Just the four of us."

"Cozy." McWade patted one of her creamy white hands. "See you tonight."

"Ten-four on that," she replied with a wink.

McWade wondered on his way out whether Rose had any idea how disarmingly fetching she could sometimes be. He could easily see, from Lucy Marlow's perspective, how suitable he and Rose

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would be as a married couple. A couple who would follow Lucy and Grant Marlow to the U. S. Senate and ultimately to the White House. But Rose was gun-shy after being used as a punching bag by her ex-husband, a drunk by whom she thankfully had borne no children. And McWade had always given his public-service career priority over finding, or even looking for, a marriage partner. Although clearly interested in each other, neither of them seemed to be able to muster the emotional strength to take that first crucial step toward a more intimate relationship.

Walking toward his office in the adjoining state administration building, McWade abruptly changed directions and took an elevator down to the parking garage. Ten minutes later he was on the Interstate driving through soybean fields toward the maximum-security state prison.

Parmalee State Prison had been built ninety years earlier using convict labor from a nearby minimum-security penal farm, with stone cut from a state quarry and hand-molded into bricks, bulwarks, and bastion blocks to form cellhouses, walls, and parapets. It was, at the time the construction was completed, a classic and much praised example of American penology at its finest. Now, nine decades later, it was an ugly, outmoded, scorned work of a system of silent incarceration long rejected. Governor Grant Marlow was at the moment having a shiny new modern facility built nearby, using bid-produced private contractors, union laborers, powerful heavy equipment, and construction material imported from Mexican quarries. It would be ready for the state's growing inmate population in another year. Meanwhile, there was Parmalee.

In the prison's administration building, which was half inside and half outside the big wall, McWade entered the reception area of Warden Ross Duval's office.

"Good morning, Leon," he said to the warden's secretary. Leon, a former college professor, was a lifer in his twenty-first year for having murdered a young student of his with whom he had been having an affair that he had wanted to continue, but which she told him would end with her graduation. Being unable to part with her, Leon had strangled her to death the night before commencement.
"Warden busy?" McWade asked.

"No, sir, Mr. Director," Leon replied. "Go right in, sir."

Ross Duval looked up and smiled as his boss walked in. He and McWade were longtime friends, having served as rookie corrections officers years earlier. It was McWade who had appointed Ross Duval warden of Parmalee.

"Hey, Bobby," the warden said. "You're just in time for lunch, or is this something official?"

"Unofficially official, but lunch sounds good. This may be the most dilapidated prison in six states, but nobody can say our con-

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victs aren't well fed."

"They ought to be, with six inmate farms sowing and reaping everything we eat. Not to mention the best dairy farm in the state."

Ross told Leon where he would be, and he and McWade made their way through a double-deadlocked corridor into the prison proper, and across an immaculately manicured interior lawn toward the prison dining hall, which sat between two massive cellblocks.

"A federal court stayed Graham's execution," McWade told him as they walked.

"You're kidding!" Duval responded. "On what grounds?"

"The way lethal injection is carried out. They said there's no way to *prove* that the condemned man is unconscious and can't feel pain before we kill him."

"What nonsense!" Duval groaned. "The dosage of sedative alone is probably enough to kill him."

"*Probably*," McWade pointed out, "is the operative word. The appeals court wants to be *positive*."

Duval fell silent. As an opponent of capital punishment, he disliked seeing *any* execution carried out—but if one *had* to be, there was no question in his mind that lethal injection was easily the most humane.

"Listen, Ross," McWade said, "this won't affect your resignation in any way—"

"But it will," Duval disagreed. "I said I'd stay on until after Carter Graham was executed."

"Yes, but that was contingent on him being executed this Friday. And you already have a new position waiting for you—what organization is that with again?"

"The National Movement to Abolish Executions. It's based in New York."

"I wouldn't want you to lose that, Ross." McWade stopped before they reached the building where the huge dining room was located. "Look, I know how your anti-capital-punishment sentiments have been growing over the years, and how you've been struggling to juggle those feelings with your sense of duty to your corrections career. I think if we hadn't been such good friends, you'd have walked out on this job a couple of years ago. But you've been honorable enough to come to me, to discuss candidly your changing views, and to give me enough advance notice of your decision so that we would be able to work out a transition without the liberal press making a major issue of it. I appreciate how you've handled this, and so does the governor. I want you to let your resignation stand as of next Monday, just as if Carter Graham had been executed this Friday." McWade put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Take your New York job, Ross. We'll handle Carter Graham without you having to push the buttons."

Ross Duval choked back an emotional swallow. "I don't want to dump my responsibilities on anybody else—"

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"You won't. Believe me. It'll be all right. Come on—"

McWade started walking again, and presently he and Duval entered the cavernous inmate dining hall where some two thousand convicts were fed two meals a day—breakfast and supper. The noon meal, brown paper-bagged, was eaten by the majority of them in the fields and shops where they worked. At the moment, only a couple of hundred clerical and maintenance workers were lining up for the midday meal. McWade and Duval moved into line with them, had their food dished up, and carried their plastic trays to a cordoned-off corner area in which there was a sign reading: STAFF ONLY. As they sat down to eat, Duval suddenly said, "Oh, I almost forgot. A young woman claiming to be Loretta Graham's daughter came to see me this morning. She wants permission to witness Carter's execution. It's a moot point at the moment, I guess."

McWade frowned deeply. "I didn't think Graham and his wife had any children."

"There are none on record." Duval shrugged. "But she claims she's the victim's daughter and has a birth certificate to prove it. Her name is Roberta Rudd. I told her she would have to get permission from you. She's coming to your office in the morning."

McWade's frown did not go away.

That night, in the residential quarters of the governor's mansion, Grant and Lucy Marlow entertained their longtime friends, Rose Fuller and Bobby McWade. During dinner, the governor reminisced about his and McWade's college days.

"I wouldn't have made it through the freshman year without Bobby," he recalled. "I concluded during the first week of orientation lectures that he was the smartest person in the incoming class, and from that moment on I made him my best buddy."

"You're exaggerating, as usual," McWade demurred. He winked at the first lady. "Typical politician."

"Oh, I don't think so," Lucy Marlow said firmly. "Don't forget, I live with this man. Would you believe, I sometimes have to balance his personal checkbook for him? He contends that he can't be overdrawn if he still has blank checks. Brilliant he definitely is not."

The laughter around the table was genuine and warm. The laughter of friends: comfortable, unself-conscious.

"Seriously," said the governor, "if Bobby had been able to finish college, he might very well be in my office today. He was that bright."

"Bright but poor," McWade added.

"The governor we had then was a scoundrel and a thief," Lucy Marlow declared. "He cut off more educational funding than any chief executive in this state's history, depriving smart young men like Bobby of their hardship scholarships after just one year. Scandalous, that's what it was."

"Well," Rose Fuller pointed out, "Bobby has done pretty well for

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himself *without* finishing college. Director of Corrections is not exactly clerking at Wal-Mart."

"I've done well because I have a good friend with a long memory," McWade said, raising his glass in a silent toast to Grant Marlow.

"Nonsense," said the governor. "You'd have done just as well without me. Might have taken you a little longer, but you'd have gotten there. Remember, you had already risen to the rank of guard lieutenant before I was elected to my first term. You were moving up the ladder in state corrections very nicely." He laughed. "Hey, remember after my first inauguration when I was making an inspection of our prisons and saw you again? I think my mouth dropped open five inches, I was so surprised!"

"Fate, that's what it was," Lucy Marlow stated emphatically. "Plain old God-given fate. Just like when Rose and I ran into each other at the airport that day, after not being in touch for ten years. Now look at us, here we are, all together, the best of friends, enjoying our good fortune and prosperity!"

His own prosperity, McWade knew, had come through the generosity of Grant Marlow. As a poor small-town boy fresh out of high school, young Bobby McWade had taken advantage of a newly instituted state hardship program to enter the university tuition free, contingent upon maintaining a 3.0 or better (out of 4) grade-point average. Naturally intelligent, unusually diligent in his studies, McWade consistently reached 4.0 in all classes—even while finding time to tutor, coach, and sometimes aid in artfully cheating, his newfound friend, Grant Marlow, the progeny of a prominent state political family.

But all of McWade's hard work was negated when, after only one year, the then-governor, citing unexpected cost increases in ongoing highway improvement, abruptly repealed the hardship college-tuition program. Failing to obtain a student bank loan, because he had no credit history or collateral, McWade had to drop out. Rather than take a menial job with no future, he enlisted in the Marine Corps, intending to make a career in the military.

During the final months of his second enlistment, after distinguishing himself in the Gulf War and subsequently rising in the ranks as a military policeman, McWade was recruited by representatives of his home state's new governor to become part of a program to train fresh, higher-caliber corrections officers to replace retiring old-line prison "bosses" who ran the penitentiaries with billy clubs instead of brains.

Weary of military life, impressed by the prospect of civil-service advancement, liking the idea of settling down in his own home state, McWade took his discharge and entered the Parmalee State Prison corrections-officer training program. Upon completion, he remained on the job for a decade, achieving promotion from junior officer to senior officer, to sergeant, to senior sergeant, and finally to the rank of corrections lieutenant. His name was at the top of the

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list for promotion to Captain of the Yard when, one day, a new governor and his entourage came to inspect the prison.

McWade remembered Grant Marlow from college, of course, and had followed his political career from county prosecutor to district attorney to state attorney general to lieutenant governor, and finally to the governor's office itself. Lieutenant McWade doubted, however, that Grant Marlow would remember him. He was very mistaken. During a review of prison officers, Governor Grant Marlow glanced at McWade, looked away, frowned, turned back, and looked down at the nametag on McWade's uniform, which read: LT. R. MCWADE. His mouth dropped open.

"Bobby?"

Saluting, McWade said, "Hello, Governor. Congratulations on your election, sir."

"Bobby McWade?" Grant Marlow was smiling widely. "Well, I'll be damned! Bobby McWade!"

Later that day, after lunching with his director of corrections and Parmalee's warden, Grant Marlow had McWade ushered into a private office. "Bobby McWade," he said, shaking his head incredulously. "How the hell are you, buddy?"

"Very well, thank you, sir," McWade replied formally. "Cut the crap, Bobby. And drop the 'sir.'" Marlow held out his hand. "The name's Grant, remember?"

McWade relaxed and they shook hands, friends again.

From that day on, Bobby McWade was a made man in the administration of Governor Grant Marlow. A week later, the captain of the yard was given a very generous bonus to take early retirement, and McWade was promoted to that job. A year later, the corrections director was given a similarly extravagant offer, and Parmalee's warden was appointed to replace him—with McWade moving into the warden's office. And three years after that, during which time McWade worked tirelessly for Grant Marlow's reelection, the second-term governor retired the director of corrections and gave the job to his old college buddy.

That was about the time that Carter Graham was convicted of bludgeoning his wife, Loretta Rudd Graham, and dropping her unconscious body into the Tuskey River with a spare tire tied to her feet.

The morning after he dined with Rose Fuller and the Marlows, McWade's secretary announced that a young woman named Roberta Rudd was asking to see him. McWade had her shown in. He had earlier been reviewing the Graham conviction file, which included several photographs of the victim as she had looked in life. The young woman who entered McWade's office bore a striking resemblance to the late Loretta Rudd Graham. The likeness was so extraordinary that it momentarily unnerved Bobby McWade; it was like see-

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ing the dead woman in the photographs as she had looked as a girl.

"Please sit down, Miss Rudd," McWade said.

"Thank you, sir. Warden Duval at Parmalee Prison said I had to see you to get permission to witness the execution of Carter Graham."

"I'm sure you know by now that the execution has been put off—"

"Yes, but he'll be executed eventually, won't he?" she asked urgently.

"Probably. Warden Duval said you were Loretta Rudd's daughter. Is that true?"

"Yes. She was my mother."

"But Carter Graham isn't your father?"

"No." Roberta Rudd looked down. "My mother was pregnant when she married Carter Graham. I was born seven months later. Carter must have suspected at once that I wasn't his child, because he insisted on a blood test. That proved he was right. He told my mother to keep quiet about it and get rid of me. Mother sent me to live with my grandmother, Lillian Rudd, in the poor part of town. Eventually she got Grandmom and me a new house, and provided for us right up to the time Carter killed her. The way she died broke my Grandmom's heart; she passed away several months later."

"I see," McWade said thoughtfully. "Did you get to know your mother at all?"

"Oh, sure," the young woman replied, her voice suddenly cheerful. "Mother visited me every Saturday. We could never be seen in town together, but after I got older she would drive us to nearby towns or into the city and we'd spend the day together doing girl things: you know, shopping, having lunch, going to movies—" Her voice broke then, becoming melancholy. "I loved my mother very much—"

McWade nodded slowly. "I'm sure you did. Is that why you want to watch her killer die?"

"Yes, it is," Roberta Rudd said firmly.

"Are you certain that it's the right thing for you to do? It won't be pleasant, you know; the memory of it will remain with you forever. Wouldn't it be better for you to just keep all the good memories of your mother, not mix them up with thoughts of the man who killed her?"

"I've made up my mind, sir," she reiterated unwaveringly. "That man made my mother's life a living hell. I want to watch him die—and I hope he suffers terribly."

"The point is, Miss Rudd, he probably won't suffer at all. It'll be like you were watching him go to sleep."

"But the newspaper stories this morning said the federal court wasn't convinced that the execution would be painless. They said it was possible that he would be aware that he was being killed, and that he *would* be suffering." Her eyes fixed unblinkingly on McWade. "That's what I'm hoping for. I want him to suffer."

"Do you think your mother would approve of what you're doing?" McWade asked quietly.

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Roberta Rudd's expression softened. "I don't know," she replied. Then, more honestly, "Probably not. My mother was a very kind person, very gentle. It's true what everybody says, that she only married Carter Graham for his money and social standing; she was tired of being dirt poor and having no kind of better future ahead of her. It was that fear of always being so wretchedly inferior to other people that drove her to accept Carter Graham's proposal, and then to stay married to him. I believe the only really immoral thing she ever did was to marry for money. And that was what killed her." Roberta's voice became warm. "When I was a very little girl, I couldn't pronounce her name; I couldn't say 'Loretta,' so I would say her name was 'Retta.' Whenever I did that, she would get the most unusual expression on her face, almost angelic, and she would look at me as if I were truly a treasure to her."

They grew silent then, McWade and the young woman looking into each other's eyes, each of them experiencing a personal emotion that neither thought the other would be able to comprehend.

Presently McWade pressed a button on the desk and his secretary came in. "Yes, sir?"

"Edna, please have Miss Rudd here fill out a witness request form and see that she gets a pass to the Carter Graham execution when it is rescheduled."

"Yes, sir."

Roberta Rudd rose and held out her hand. "Thank you, Mr. McWade."

McWade stood and shook her hand. "I hope I'm not doing you a disservice, Miss Rudd." He held her hand several seconds longer than necessary, then self-consciously released it.

After his secretary escorted Roberta Rudd out and the door was closed behind them, McWade opened the file on his desk and looked at the photographs of Loretta Rudd Graham again.

Retta, he thought.

Friday came and went with no answer from the federal court about reversing Carter Graham's stay of execution.

On Saturday, Bobby McWade drove down to Parmalee Prison and found Ross Duval cleaning out his desk and packing up a few personal things he had in his office. There had been a farewell party for him the previous night, attended by McWade and all of the corrections officers not on duty at the time. It was a crowded affair; Ross Duval was as popular a warden as his predecessor, Bobby McWade, had been. Ironically, the party took place at the same time as a more controlled mini-celebration by the prison's inmates when Carter Graham was moved from the execution-chamber holding cell back onto Death Row.

"Hey, Bobby," Ross Duval said when McWade walked in. "What's a big-shot governor appointee like you working on Saturday for?"

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"I thought I'd buy you a personal going-away drink," McWade said, taking a pint bottle of Jack Daniels from his inside coat pocket.

Duval's eyebrows went up. "That's contraband, sir," he said with mock solemnity. "It's illegal to bring alcohol into a state prison facility. I'm going to have to place you under arrest."

"Please do," McWade said. "I could use a vacation."

Duval crossed the office and took two coffee mugs from a cabinet. McWade poured, and the two friends sat in adjacent visitors chairs.

"I'm going to miss you, Ross," McWade said as they touched mugs.

"Me too you," Duval told him.

"Been a long time since we were rookie officers."

"That it has, boss."

"What's this job of yours in New York going to be like?"

"Lot of administrative work. Keeping track of executions on the national level, breaking the stats down into age, race, gender, so on. Making speeches at colleges, Rotary Clubs, legal associations, that kind of thing. Lots of fund-raising."

"Put me on your list for an annual contribution," McWade said.

Duval's eyebrows went up again. "You, Bobby? I thought you were strongly pro capital punishment."

"I am. But when somebody like you, a man I know to be honest, a man I respect, goes over to the other side, I begin to wonder if there might not be something to that position. Enough, perhaps, to make it an issue to merit support." He smiled slyly. "Just don't tell anybody I'm contributing."

"Of course not." Duval's expression became curious. "What started you thinking in that direction, Bobby?"

"The young woman, Roberta Rudd, that you sent to see me. There was something about her grim determination to see Carter Graham suffer for killing her mother—I don't know, it unsettled me somehow." McWade shifted in his chair and took a sip from the mug he held. "Don't get me wrong, Ross: I'm still very much in favor of executions for some people: the Bundys and Gacys of the world, the Westerfields and Joseph Smith, men who kidnap, rape, and murder children like John Couey and Willie Crane did, and—who was that animal from Fargo, North Dakota, who held that little eight-year-old girl captive for, what was it, six weeks—"

"Edward Duncan," said Duval.

"—yeah, Duncan. People like that *deserve* to die. Matter of fact, I think there should be a *federal* child-murder law requiring *hanging* for offenses like the death of that little nine-year-old who was buried alive in one of those plastic bags made for grass and leaves, and the little seven-year-old who was kept on a fishing boat until the pedophile who kidnapped her was through with her and dumped her into Tampa Bay—"

"I get the point, Bobby," said Duval, holding up a hand. "But where do we draw the line? Where do we say kill this one, don't kill

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that one? And what about when we kill the *wrong* person—the innocent person?"

McWade could only shake his head. "I don't know, Ross. I just don't know."

"How about Carter Graham? What if he didn't *know* his wife was still alive when he threw her into the Tuskey River? Should he then have been given a life sentence instead of death? How do you feel about Carter Graham, Bobby?"

Instead of answering, McWade poured them each another drink. "There are too many questions, Ross—and frankly, not enough answers. Because it isn't enough to say simply abolish capital punishment. I don't know what's right or wrong anymore; I just know what the *law* is—and for better or worse we have to follow it. It's the only thing that stands between us and a social nightmare."

"Do you know that we have some thirty-five *hundred* condemned prisoners in America today?" Duval quietly challenged. "And that sixty of them are *women?*"

"I know the numbers are high," McWade admitted. "I mean, they'd have to be: Thirty-eight states have capital punishment; only twelve don't."

"Does it matter to you that we are the only Western country in the world that still executes people? All the other capital-punishment countries are in Africa, South America, Asia, the Middle East—"

"Okay, Ross, okay." Now McWade held up a hand. "I came to have a farewell drink with you, not to get into a debate."

Ross Duval took a deep, weary breath. "I'm sorry, Bobby. I didn't mean to lecture—"

McWade shook his head. "You weren't. I just wish I was as sure of myself on this issue as you are."

Duval smiled, rather sadly. "Maybe someday you will be, boss."

"Maybe," McWade said.

The two men shook hands finally and said goodbye.

As McWade was leaving the prison, he thought about Roberta Rudd, and how passionately she wanted Carter Graham to suffer while he died. And he thought of the young woman's mother in the Tuskey River, weighed down by that spare tire. Had Carter Graham known she was alive when he put her there? And did it really make any difference? Ross Duval had asked him how he felt about Carter Graham, and McWade had not answered him.

Now, driving away from Parmalee, a name kept resounding in his mind like a ricocheting bullet.

Retta, Retta, Retta—

On Monday morning, McWade received a call from Attorney General Fred Willis.

"The appeals court has reversed its previous order, Bobby. The execution is back on—with the condition that we use a brain-wave

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monitor to make sure Graham is completely unconscious when we kill him. I've already talked to Art Meadows; he'll have one of those electroencephalograph machines sent down to Parmalee this afternoon, with a medical technician to instruct your people in its use."

"Okay," said McWade. "I'll notify the captain of the yard to have his execution team stand by for instructions. Has Grant set a new date yet?"

"Tomorrow," said Willis. "He's preparing a new death warrant to sign right now."

At that moment, McWade's direct line to the governor's office lit up.

"Grant's on the phone now," McWade told Fred Willis. "Talk to you later." He pushed a red button on his phone base. "Good morning, Governor."

"Fred call you yet, Bobby?"

"Just now. We'll be ready for tomorrow."

"Good. I'll have a new death warrant over to you in an hour. I want to get this killer done and off our plate so I'll have a clean path to announcing my candidacy for the Senate. With Duval gone, who's going to be running the show at Parmalee?"

With just a hint of pause, McWade said, "I guess I will. Can't very well appoint a new warden the day before an execution—"

"And you've done executions before, Bobby—"

"Yes, when I was warden. Five of them."

"Okay, good. This will work out fine. The press will like it: State director of corrections steps in to see that justice is finally carried out. I'll emphasize that in the press conference I'll have to hold tomorrow when I deny clemency again. Keep in touch, Bobby."

There was a click and the line went dead. McWade pushed another button on his phone base that was a direct line to Parmalee. "This is McWade," he said when the prison switchboard answered. "Get me the COY, please." Momentarily, Roy Dillard, who was captain of the yard and second in command to the warden, answered, "Yard Captain Dillard—"

"Bob McWade, Roy. You've heard about Graham?"

"Got it on the news a few minutes ago. When do we do him?"

"Tomorrow night. I'll be there to push the buttons; you run everything until then. Get him back in the death-watch cell right away, before the other cons have a chance to get into an uproar."

"I'll handle everything. Don't worry. This is pretty routine for me now. My execution team has juiced eleven men and one woman since the reinstatement. Five of them were under you, remember?"

"Yeah. Listen, Roy, the state surgeon general is sending over a brain monitor of some kind, like the electrocardiograph we use. There'll be somebody along to check you and your team out on it."

"We'll be ready."

"I'll be out later today to go over the procedure with you, in case I'm rusty. See you then."

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As soon as McWade hung up, his direct line to the governor's office rang again. When he picked it up, he heard Rose Fuller's lazy, sweet drawl say, "Good morning."

"Hey, Rose. What's up?"

"Nothing really. I just heard that you'll be pushing the buttons on Carter Graham tomorrow and was wondering if you're all right with it?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." A pause. "I think I am." Another pause. "I'm not sure, Rose."

"How about dinner tonight and an understanding ear. Think that might help?"

"Are you asking for a *date,* Rose Fuller?" he inquired in mock shock.

"I am."

"Lucy Marlow would be *so* proud of you."

Rose was quiet for a moment, a very brief moment, then said pointedly, "I'm not doing it for Lucy Marlow. I'm doing it for Rose Fuller. How about it?"

"You're on," McWade said without hesitation.

"Good. You like Italian?"

"Love it."

"Okay, there's a little place on the corner of James and Richmond, called Nicolino's. It's just down the block from my apartment; I'll meet you there. Eight good for you?"

"Eight's fine. Shall I invite Grant and Lucy?"

"You do and I'll kill you."

She hung up.

Later that day, McWade drove down to Parmalee and found Roy Dillard in his office. Dillard, a strapping black man of fifty, rose from his desk. "Good afternoon, sir."

"Drop the 'sir,' Roy. You *trained* me, remember?"

Dillard chuckled. "Did a damned good job of it, too," he said. "Look at you now." He was a *black* black man, and when he smiled, as he did now, he lit up a room. "That was a hell of a party we had Friday night. I'm sure gonna miss Boss Ross."

"Yeah, me too. Especially tomorrow. You ready to give me a refresher course in Lethal Injection 101?"

"You bet. But all you need to brush up on is the anteroom, right? The chamber and everything else will be taken care of by my X-team." X for execution.

McWade walked with Dillard to a small, separate building that adjoined the prison's Death Row, to which it was connected by a short windowless corridor. The building was divided into five rooms: a death-watch cell, with bars on three sides, in which the condemned person spent their last twenty-four hours; a small adjacent room in which last visits were held and where the last meal was served; a larger room, accessible from the outside, for witnesses

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to watch the execution; the death chamber itself, which contained the white rubber-padded execution table, complete with arm, wrist, chest, hip, leg, and ankle restraints; and the anteroom, into which an intravenous line would run from a needle in the condemned person's arm through a small metal panel in the wall. On the anteroom side, the line divided and connected with three hypodermic syringes which rested on a shelf, in three open sections painted yellow, green, and red. Between the shelf and the metal plate, each of the three lines had a tributary connection to a container of saline solution to flush the main canal between injections. Below the shelf was a set of drawers, also painted yellow, green, and red, which held extra hypodermic needles for their color-coded lines. A rectangular one-way window above the shelf allowed the executioner to view the person on the table in the chamber. A color-coded, three-inch, elliptical button between the incoming lines and the shelf allowed the executioner to activate each line in turn. Above the shelf was a large clock to tell him when to do it. A second window off to the right, also one-way, looked into the witness viewing room.

"Look familiar?" Roy Dillard asked as he and McWade stepped into the anteroom.

"Like a bad dream," McWade said. He had not enjoyed being the button-pusher on the five men he had put to death.

"Well, everything's the same as it's always been," Dillard said matter-of-factly. "Yellow button flushes the line with saline, then injects the sodium thiopental to put the condemned person to sleep; green button flushes the line again and injects the pancuronium bromide to paralyze the diaphragm and lungs; red button flushes the line a third time and injects potassium chloride to stop the heart. Simple as A-B-C."

"We still using the same chemical firm and technicians to set everything up?" McWade asked.

"Same company," Dillard confirmed. "Chemicals and techs approved by the state surgeon general. Incidentally, we got checked out on that brain monitor earlier today, so everything is go on that."

"Okay, good." McWade stared through the one-way window at the white padded table. For an odd moment he was transfixed, riveted, spellbound by the sight of the death table. An image of Roberta Rudd suddenly floated in the chamber between him and the table. The memory of her voice surfaced in his mind: *I want to watch him die—and I hope he suffers terribly.*

"You okay?" Roy Dillard asked from the doorway.

McWade stood motionless, staring.

Retta.

Dillard frowned. "Bobby—?"

As suddenly as the spell had come over him, McWade snapped out of it. "What?" He looked at Dillard. "Yeah, sure, I'm okay." He forced a half-smile. "Just thinking about it, is all."

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"Have a good stiff drink ahead of time. You'll be okay, boss."

"Sure." Authority crept back into McWade's voice. "Go into the chamber, Roy, and see if you can adjust the number four floodlight about an inch to the left; I seem to be getting a glare—"

"Sure thing."

As McWade watched Roy Dillard through the window, the spell came back again.

Retta.

With it this time came the memory of the photographs in the file in his office. Photos of a young woman as she had once been: pretty, smiling, alive. Photographs of Loretta Rudd Graham.

Retta—

McWade opened the yellow drawer under the shelf and removed one of the hypodermic needles used to inject the sedative that put the condemned person to sleep, so that death would be painless.

Carefully he put the packaged needle into his pocket.

At dinner that night at Nicolino's, McWade and Rose Fuller sat at a table for two tucked neatly in a cozy back corner.

"This is nice, Rose," McWade said. "Thanks for suggesting it."

She smiled, a very slight smile. "I thought you might need a little moral support for tomorrow. I remembered how tense you used to get before an execution while you were warden."

"Really?" That surprised McWade. "What made you remember a thing like that?"

"I don't know. I just did." The slight smile again. "I've always kind of liked you, Bobby."

"I've always kind of liked you too, Rose."

Their eyes met and held.

"Maybe," Rose said, "we would have gotten to know each other a lot better if Lucy Marlow had let us alone."

McWade chuckled wryly. "Maybe so."

Because Rose knew the restaurant, McWade let her order. She asked for a bottle of Barolo and one lasagna and one mostaccioli dinner. Plus an extra serving dish. "So we can share," she explained.

As they sipped their wine while the dinners were being prepared, they made small talk about their respective careers, and whether they would follow Grant Marlow if he won the Senate race and moved to Washington.

"I'm kind of settled here," Rose said. "I just redecorated my condo last year. Finally got it exactly the way I want it."

"I'm in the same boat," McWade told her. "Bought a little two-bedroom house. Got a great housekeeper to take care of it. Nice backyard for my garden—"

"Your *garden?*"

"Yeah." For some reason, he suddenly felt a little self-conscious. "I, uh, grow tomatoes, lettuce, sweet potatoes—you seem surprised."

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"No, no," she said, a little too quickly. But she was. Pleasantly so. Reaching across the table, she patted his hand fondly.

The bottle of wine was almost empty by the time their dinners were served, so McWade ordered another. Gradually, as they ate, their conversation became more relaxed. From time to time, McWade reached down to feel the packaged hypodermic needle in his pocket, as if to reassure himself that it was still there. He had transferred it from the suit coat he had worn earlier to the sport coat he wore now. He had wondered in passing *why* he had done that, but could determine no reason for it. Somehow it had just seemed natural.

"My ex-husband was a mean son of a bitch," Rose told him when the wine began to spike. "I often wonder why I ever married him. I can't remember loving him, but I suppose I must have." She tilted her head a bit. "And you've never married, Bobby?"

"No."

"Right woman never came along?"

"There was one, a long time ago. But it didn't work out." Now *his* head tilted. "You ever wish you'd had a child, Rose?"

"Not with the bastard I was married to," she said emphatically. Then she paused, pondering. "I've thought about it, of course. I guess all childless women secretly do."

"If you'd had a daughter, she would be a young lady today," McWade calculated, thinking of Roberta Rudd. "I think you'd probably be a perfect mother and a great friend to a young lady."

"Why, thank you, Bobby. That's a very nice compliment." She was touched.

After dinner, they took a long stroll around several blocks, going the long way to her apartment building. "I want to thank you for tonight, Rose," McWade told her as they walked. "I was getting pretty wound up about tomorrow. You've helped me to unwind a lot."

At the entrance to her building, Rose asked, "Do you want to come up, Bobby?"

"Are you sure you want me to?"

She put a hand on his arm. "I'm sure."

"Then I want to."

The next morning, in his bathroom, Bobby McWade opened the cellophane package he had taken from the death-chamber anteroom, and removed the hypodermic needle. From his medicine cabinet, he took a pint bottle of isopropyl rubbing alcohol and carefully drew a quantity of it up into the needle's syringe.

I don't know what this will do to him, Roberta, but I'm sure it won't be good.

At his office, with the carefully rewrapped needle in a rolled-up handkerchief in his inside coat pocket, McWade waited until Edna, his secretary, went to lunch, then opened one of the office's filing cabinets and removed a folder labeled: GRAHAM, CARTER—EXECUTION

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WITNESSES. From it, he located the information form on Roberta Rudd. He was surprised to see that she lived right there in the city, not downstate in Nowers County as he had assumed. But then, he reminded himself, she *had* told him that her grandmother, who had raised her in the home provided by Loretta Rudd Graham, had passed away several months after Loretta's murder. Maybe she sold the house to get out of "Nowheres" County, McWade thought.

He made a copy of Roberta Rudd's witness application and returned the original to the filing cabinet. Back at his desk, he opened the superior-court file on Carter Graham's conviction and commitment to the Department of Corrections. He removed the photos of Loretta Rudd Graham as she had looked when alive. Selecting one, he put it into his wallet. Then he initiated the direct line to Grant Marlow's office.

"Hello, Bobby," Rose Fuller answered, reading her caller ID.

"Hello, Rose."

It took them several seconds to get a dialogue on track.

"Last night was very—very *special* for me, Rose—"

"Me too, Bobby—" She paused, then asked, "Will you come over tonight after—you know—"

"I'm not sure I'll be able to," McWade said tentatively.

"You want to, don't you?"

"Very much—" Something in his voice was not right.

"Bobby, is anything wrong?"

"No. It's just that—" *Careful,* he warned himself. "—that I have a feeling the execution might not—not run as smoothly as it should—"

"Bobby," Rose said urgently, "if something's wrong, please tell me. Maybe I can help in some way—"

He had to get out of this. "Rose, I'll come over as soon after the execution as I can."

"Promise?"

"Word of honor."

"Okay, then. I'll be waiting."

"Is Grant available?"

"Yes. Hold on—"

Seconds later, Grant Marlow said, "Bobby? Everything all right?"

"Yes, everything's fine. We're right on schedule."

"Good. I'll hold a press conference at five o'clock, in time for the evening news. Graham's lawyers have just delivered an appeal for clemency, which I will deny."

"I'll be shutting down my office in a little while," McWade told him. "All calls will be forwarded to the public information office."

"Good." There was a pause, as if, McWade thought, Marlow was trying to telephonically read his mind. "You okay with this, Bobby?" Had Grant Marlow heard something in his voice too, as Rose had?

"Yeah, I'm good." McWade felt the needle in his pocket. "I'm fine, Grant. Don't worry about anything."

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"All right. Let's have a drink later tonight."

When his secretary returned, McWade said, "Edna, shut down the phones and have all calls relayed to the PIO. Then close the office and take the rest of the day off. I'll be down at Parmalee."

"Yes, sir." Edna added, "Good luck, Mr. McWade," as he was walking out.

It was just getting wintery dark when McWade walked into Roy Dillard's office. The television was already on. McWade drew himself a cup of coffee from the COY's private urn, and pulled up a chair.

"Everything set?" he asked.

"Locked and loaded, boss," said Dillard. He handed McWade a small two-way hand radio to use. "Ready to go at six."

"Witnesses all here?"

"Most of them. Having coffee and cookies in the press room. Bus standing by to shuttle them over when we give the word—"

"Here comes the word for us right now," McWade said, as a NEWS ALERT graphic interrupted some basketball scores. Next, viewers were taken live to the office of Governor Grant Marlow.

"My fellow citizens," the governor said solemnly, "for the second time since his conviction for the brutal murder of his wife, I have just denied executive clemency for condemned killer Carter Graham, who is scheduled to be executed by lethal injection at six o'clock this evening at Parmalee State Prison—"

"Okay," McWade said, "let's roll."

The two men left the COY office, exited the prison administration building, and followed the same path they had taken the previous day to the small death-chamber building adjacent to Death Row.

Just inside the building, there sat on a long bench the execution team, four volunteer corrections officers who were paid a bonus for assisting in executions.

"We're go," Dillard told them without preliminary. "Move out."

The four officers went about their practiced routine. One unlocked and opened the door to the execution chamber itself, entered, and raised the blinds on five windows through which the witnesses would watch. Another retrieved from a small cabinet just outside the chamber two red telephones and plugged one into a jack above the cabinet, and the second into a jack inside the anteroom where McWade would control the execution buttons.

The two remaining officers moved into the death-watch cell where another officer sat at a small desk observing Carter Graham talking through the bars of his cell to two lawyers.

"We're go," one of the X-team officers told the death-watch guard. He immediately said to Carter Graham's visitors, "Five minutes, gentlemen."

Back near the chamber door, Dillard unhooked a two-way radio from his Sam Browne uniform belt and said into it, "COY to press-

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room officer—" When the call was answered, he said, "We're go for six. Bring them over." That done, he lifted the receiver of the first red telephone and spoke to the prison switchboard operator. "This is Dillard on the chamber phone. Open a line to the lieutenant governor's office, please." Dillard knew, as a matter of protocol, that on execution nights, the governor would be unavailable after denying clemency. Any reprieve, in the unlikely event that one would be granted, would come through his lieutenant governor.

Once the chamber line was open, Dillard stepped into the anteroom and went through the same procedure with the second red telephone. As regulations required, the warden, who in this case was McWade in a pro tem position, observed and verified each step of the preliminary activity required to legally execute a person. As McWade watched now, one hand occasionally reached inside his coat to feel the hypodermic needle he still carried.

What would happen when it was all over? he wondered. *Who would be blamed? Certainly not him. All he had done was push the buttons. No one would ever dream that he, the Director of Corrections, had switched needles to inject alcohol into the condemned man. What possible motive could he have to do such a thing? No,* he silently told himself, *the blame would fall on the chemical company and its technicians, who prepared everything in the anteroom. But nothing could be proven against them.*

Something else suddenly occurred to him. What he was doing, in addition to giving Roberta Rudd the agonizing death she wanted to see, would also make Ross Duval very happy, because the incident would undoubtedly cause a moratorium to be put on executions in the state, and might even cause the state legislators to ban capital punishment altogether.

McWade blinked away these thoughts, and wondered: Am I trying to justify what I'm going to do? By using Roberta Rudd and Ross Duval as excuses?

No, not at all, he told himself empathically.

He knew exactly why he was doing it.

"Visitors' bus has arrived," Dillard said, interrupting McWade's ruminations.

"Already?" McWade looked at a big clock on the wall above the chamber telephone. Forty minutes had gone by since they had left Dillard's office.

"Time flies when you're having fun," Dillard quipped. But his dark face was somber. He did not like this any more than McWade did, or than Ross Duval had. "You want to go into the death-watch room with me?"

"No, you handle that, Roy. I'll wait in the anteroom."

"Okay. We'll bring him in at five of six."

Dillard went into the death-watch room, where Carter Graham was now standing in clean white underwear. Under his shorts he wore an

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execution diaper fashioned from two extra-large child's diapers well taped together. The X-team didn't want to be doing any more post-execution cleaning up than was absolutely necessary. The odor alone would be bad enough, but at least they had surgical masks for that.

In the anteroom, McWade put down the hand radio Dillard had given him. Taking a deep, nervous breath, he quickly removed the alcohol-filled hypodermic needle from his pocket and unwrapped it on the shelf under a yellow syringe placed there earlier by the chemical-company technicians who set up the execution device. Very quickly, with a single half turn he had learned as warden, he removed the syringe containing sodium thiopental and replaced it with the yellow syringe and needle he had brought in. Just as quickly, he wrapped the removed needle in the handkerchief and put it in his coat pocket. Another handkerchief from his trousers pocket he wet with saliva and carefully wiped his fingerprints from the plastic syringe of the needle he had attached.

Stepping over to the back window, McWade watched as the execution witnesses filed into the viewing room. After several moments, they were all seated and one of the two officers assigned to the room closed and locked the outside door. Frowning, McWade scanned the faces once, quickly, then a second time, slowly, one by one. He did not see Roberta Rudd.

Turning back to the shelf, he activated the hand radio. "McWade to Dillard—"

The COY came on at once. "Dillard here—"

"Roy, have all the witnesses on the list arrived?"

"All but one. Let's see here—okay, somebody named Roberta Rudd did not show up."

"Have you checked around outside?"

"She's not on the grounds; she didn't come in the main gate." Dillard waited for a long moment, then said, "We've got the legally required number of witnesses already."

There was nothing McWade could do. "Okay. Proceed without her."

She's not here. Why? After the unrelenting determination she had shown in his office to see Carter Graham suffer, *she wasn't here.*

Feeling perspiration break out on his forehead and upper lip, McWade used the pocket handkerchief again to blot his face.

Why wasn't Roberta here?

Pacing the anteroom, he glanced up at the clock above the shelf. Six minutes to go. Did it matter that Roberta wasn't there? It shouldn't. He wasn't doing this for her—not *just* for her, anyway. So did it make any difference that she wasn't part of it?

No, it did not.

At the shelf, McWade looked through the chamber window and saw Roy Dillard and the X-team bring Carter Graham in. They sat him up on the execution table and one officer removed the felt slip-

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pers he had worn to walk from the death-watch cell.

Taking out his wallet, McWade retrieved the photograph of Loretta Rudd Graham he had removed from the file in his office. He stared at it. Perspiration now ran down the back of his hairline to the collar of his shirt. Loosening his necktie, he unbuttoned the collar.

In the chamber, Carter Graham was now stretched out on the execution table. X-team officers were strapping the padded fiber restraints around his forehead, chest, upper arms, wrists, waist, thighs, and ankles. Two white-coated male nurses, both convicts from the prison hospital, were attaching heart- and brain-monitor sensors to his shaved cranium and chest, and activating the electrocardiograph and electroencephalograph machines to which they were connected.

McWade fished deeper into his wallet and brought out an old, faded high-school photograph, which he placed on the shelf next to the first photograph.

Retta, he thought. *You even named her after me. Roberta after Robert.*

Does it matter that she isn't here? Would you have wanted her here, Retta?

One of the convict nurses, who was a trained phlebotomist, began tapping the condemned man's left arm for a suitable vein.

Would *you* want this, Retta? McWade asked himself. You, who wouldn't even let me kill an ant that last night we were together?

McWade looked up at the clock. Exactly six.

Quickly, his hands trembling, he managed to put the original syringe back in place, and the one he had brought back into his pocket.

After it was over, McWade walked out onto the vapor-lighted staff parking lot and was surprised to find Rose Fuller there, standing next to her car, waiting for him.

"I had to come, Bobby. I—I knew there was something wrong, and I just had to come—"

He took her into his arms. "There *was* something wrong, Rose, but there isn't anymore." He held her back from him. "I have a long, kind of sad story to tell you. And someone I want you to meet—"

From a coat pocket he took out and unfolded the copy he had made of Roberta Rudd's visitor information application. Handing it to Rose, he asked, "Do you know where this address is?"

Tilting the page toward the overhead vapor lights, Rose read the address and said, "Yes, I think so—"

"Good. You drive while I talk."

Opening the car door for her, McWade kissed her on the lips before letting her get in. Then he walked around to get in on the passenger side.

Rose and Roberta, he thought. They're going to like each other. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

WHO'S AFRAID OF NERO WOLFE?

by Loren D. Estleman

There were a hundred good reasons not to answer the Help Wanted notice in *The Habitual Handicapper,* and only one to answer it; but answer it I did, because I'd been canned for gambling on company time and I was on parole.

The text was brief:

> Nimble-witted man needed for multitudinous duties. Salary commensurate with skill. Room and meals included. Apply at 700 Avenue J, Flatbush.

Seven Hundred was a townhouse, one of those anonymous sandstone jobs standing in a row like widows at a singles club. It ran to three stories and a half-submerged basement, with glass partitions on the roof for a garden or something. A balding party in a cutaway coat someone had forgotten to return to the rental place answered the doorbell. "Who are you, I should ask?"

I took a header on the accent and replied in Yiddish. "Arnie

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Woodbine, nimble of wit." I held up the sheet folded on the advertisement.

"Mr. Lyon is in the plant rooms ten minutes more," he said, in Yiddish also. "In the office you can wait."

I followed him down a hall and through the door he opened, into a big room furnished as both office and parlor, with a big desk that looked as if it had been carved out of a solid slab of mahogany, rows of oak file cabinets, scattered armchairs, a big green sofa, and a huge globe in a cradle in one corner, plastered all over with countries that no longer existed.

In this issue Loren Estleman begins a new series for us, one we hope will prove as much of a delight to readers and a success commercially as his Valentino series, which was an *EQMM* exclusive until the release, in April '08, of the first Valentino novel, *Frames*, from Forge. In this new series, set in Brooklyn, the Michigan author has placed the sleuthing in the hands of a devotee of another great New York detective, Nero Wolfe. ¶

As I sat, in an orange leather chair that barely let my feet touch the floor, I came down with a case of *déjà vu*. There was something familiar about the setup, but it was as tough to pin down as a dream. Whatever it was, it put my freakometer in the red zone. I was set to fly the coop when something started humming, the walls shook, a paneled section slid open, and I got my first look at Claudius Lyon.

He was the best-tailored beach ball I'd ever met: five feet from top to bottom and from side to side in a mauve three-piece with a green silk necktie and pocket square, soft cordovans on his tiny feet. His face was as round as a baby's, with no more sign of everyday wear-and-tear than a baby's had. He was carrying something in a clay pot. I was pretty sure it was a tomato plant.

On his way from the elevator he reached up without pausing to straighten a picture that had been knocked crooked by the vibration in the shaft. So far I didn't exist, but when he finished arranging the pot on the corner of his desk and lowered himself into the nearest thing I'd ever seen to a La-Z-Boy on a swivel, he fixed me with bright eyes and introduced himself. He didn't offer to shake hands.

When I told him my name, he grinned from ear to ear, a considerable expanse. "Indeed," he squeaked.

I didn't know why at the time, but I was dead sure I already had the job. He asked about my work experience. I gave him an honest answer. I'm always honest about my dishonesty when I'm not actually practicing it. "I'm a good confidence man in the second class and a first-class forger. I've got diplomas from two institutions to

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prove it. I don't have them on me, but you can confirm it by calling my parole officer."

He dug a finger inside his left ear, a gesture I would get to know as a sign his brain was in overdrive. The faster and more industriously he dug, the more energy his gray cells were putting out. When he finished he offered me refreshment. "This is the time of day for my first cream soda."

I declined, not adding that there's no time of day I'd ever consent to join him or anyone else in one. He startled me then by turning his head and shouting, "Gus!" I'd assumed he'd tug on a bell rope or something. The balding gent in the rusty tailcoat entered a minute later carrying a tray with a can on it and a Bam-Bam glass. He took the tray away empty and Lyons poured, drank, and belched discreetly into his green pocket square.

"I admire candor, up to a point." He folded and tucked it back in place. "Yours falls just to the left of that. As it happens, a man who can sell another man a bill of goods would be valuable to this agency. I can also foresee a time when an aptitude with a pen would toe the mark."

"What agency's that?"

He lifted the place where eyebrows belonged. "Why, a detective agency, of course. What did you think the job was?"

The coin dropped into the pan; I knew what it was about the situation at 700 Avenue J that had sent centipedes marching up my spine. Claudius Lyon then punched the appropriate button.

"Are you familiar with the work of a writer named Rex Stout?"

That was three years ago. My debt to the State of New York is square, so thank God I don't have to keep convincing my P.O. that my association with a screwball like Lyon is legit.

The sticking point was my felon's status, and the impossibility of my ever qualifying for a license as a private investigator. Lyon hasn't one, either, lacking as he does the professional experience. He gets around it by not charging for his services.

It's no hardship because he's as rich as the dame who writes the Harry Potter books. His late father had made certain improvements to the gasket that sealed the Cass-O-Magic pressure cooker, which is no longer in manufacture, but NASA has adapted the improvements to the door of the space shuttle, and the royalties come in regular as the water bill; I know what I'm talking about, because it's my job to deposit the checks in his account. I ordered a DEPOSIT ONLY stamp and charged it to household expenses, but I never use it. Lyon's signature is childlike, absurdly easy to duplicate on the endorsement, and I round the amount deposited to the nearest thousand and pocket the rest.

It can be as little as a few bucks or as much as a couple of hundred, and if we ever decide to go our separate ways I can afford to

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coast for a year or so before I have to turn again to the Help Wanted column.

Claudius Lyon is obsessed with the writings of Rex Stout, or more particularly those of Archie Goodwin, whom Stout represented as literary agent until Stout's death. Goodwin recorded the cases he'd helped solve for his employer, Nero Wolfe, a fat, lethargic genius who grows orchids on the roof of his New York City brownstone, drinks lots of beer, eats tons of gourmet food prepared by Fritz, his Swiss chef and major-domo, and makes expenses by unraveling complex mysteries put to him by desperate clients, many of them well-heeled. Wolfe rarely leaves home and pays Goodwin to perform as his leg man and general factotum.

For a fat little boy growing up in Brooklyn, Nero Wolfe was the nuts. Lyon loved to read mysteries, but he knew he'd never have the energy to emulate Sherlock Holmes, or the physique to withstand and deliver beatings *à la* Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, or the good looks to seduce pertinent information out of swoony female suspects like the Saint. Wolfe's obesity and sedentary habits, however, suited him right down to his wide bottom.

Some weeks before we met, Lyon had bought the Brooklyn townhouse, had it retrofitted to resemble Wolfe's sanctum, and changed his name legally to echo his hero's; Claudius, like Nero, was a lesser Roman emperor, and he felt he'd improved on the original by choosing a surname inspired by a predator more closely associated with the circuses of Rome. I haven't asked him what name he'd gone by before that. The bureaucrat who sends his checks had been wised up, he himself hasn't seen fit to volunteer anything, and while I firmly believe that the contents of another man's wallet might as well be mine, the secrets of his past are his own. To quote Lyon: "Discretion and integrity are not solely the province of the law-abiding."

I might not be working for him if Arnie Woodbine and Archie Goodwin didn't look like the same name if you squinted at it and took your eyes out of focus. He was especially pleased to learn that it's Arnie, not Arnold, on my birth certificate; Goodwin had not been born Archibald.

But maybe I doubt too much. The notice I'd read in the racing sheet had appeared for a week in the *New York Times,* the *Daily News,* and the Brooklyn papers, and had brought only disappointment in the form of an army of errand boys whose wits were about as nimble as a lawnroller, and one feminist who protested Lyon's insistence upon hiring a man. (Gus told me the master of the house hid in the plant room until she was ejected.) I'm shorter than Goodwin, not in as good shape, and have a cauliflower ear courtesy of an early disgruntled mark that makes it more of a challenge for me to charm women; but at least I'm not a feminist, and my wit has been known to turn a respectable cartwheel from time to time.

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I'm one of his lesser compromises. To begin with, he has no tolerance for adult beverages. Even the so-called non-alcoholic beers blur his judgment, and one bottle of Wolfe's brand of choice threatens to send him skipping naked through Coney Island singing "Wind Beneath My Wings." He drinks the cream soda that contributed in no small part to his lard, and keeps track of his consumption by counting the empties in the recycling bin beside his desk.

His other substitutions are strictly Bizarro world. 1. Wolfe's favorite color is yellow. Lyon prefers green, and overdoes it. With all the red in the rare old office rug handwoven by the Mandan tribe—which was wiped out by smallpox two minutes after the first European sneezed on it, hence the rarity—all those strong shades of green dotted about look like Christmas year-round. 2. Gus is no Fritz in the kitchen, although his repertoire of kosher recipes is prodigious. 3. The heartiest strain of orchid withers and turns black at Lyon's hand. Roses are no improvement. By the time I came along he'd begun cultivating brawny garden fare like tomatoes and kale, which Gus tries his best to make work with gefilte fish.

At the very least, Lyon's brown thumb has spared him the ordeal of replicating Theodore Horstmann, Wolfe's resident expert on orchids. Tomatoes require no maintenance beyond watering, fertilizing, and spraying for bugs, and he spends most of his two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon on the roof watching TV. He knows more about the backstories of all the characters in daytime dramas than any other man in the five boroughs. I've taken dozens of letters at his dictation pointing out errors in *Soap Opera Digest* to its editors.

So with my introduction into the Lyon household, the metamorphosis was complete, if skewed a bit. You'd think he'd have been as happy as a Wisconsin nut in a Waldorf salad. Instead he went into a tailspin that took all the manic out of his depression for weeks, and with sound reason; or anyway as sound as his reason ever got.

No mystery.

He'd placed another advertisement in all the regulars and *The Habitual Handicapper:*

> Vexed? Stymied? Up a tree? Consult Claudius Lyon, the world's greatest amateur detective. No fees charged. Your satisfaction is my reward. Apply in person at 700 Avenue J, Flatbush.

The notice ran for weeks, during which time Jimmy Hoffa could have camped out on the stoop with no risk of being discovered. At Lyon's prodding I made several trips outside to push the doorbell to make sure it was working. It rang with a kind of *ha*-ha that the little fatty couldn't have appreciated very much.

"Try taking out 'amateur,'" I suggested. "People think if you don't charge anything, that's all your services are worth."

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"I'm unlicensed."

"I didn't say send them a bill. Just don't say you don't in the ad."

"The phrase 'the world's greatest detective' would violate the truth-in-advertising laws. Nero Wolfe is still practicing, and he is demonstrably the world's finest in his profession."

"Who's afraid of Nero Wolfe?" I sang.

"I am. When he discovers I've counterfeited his life and livelihood, I fully expect a visit from Nathaniel Parker, his attorney. Since I do not claim to *be* Nero Wolfe, I cannot be accused of theft of identity, and because I accept no emolument for my efforts on behalf of my clients, I am not guilty of fraud. So long as I stay within the law, I'm a flea-bite in Wolfe's thick hide, nothing more. To stray over the line would bring doom upon this roof."

He slumped in his chair, looking like Humpty-Dumpty at the base of the wall. I let him sulk, opened the laptop on my desk, and pecked out this gem:

> Mystified? Claudius Lyon never is. See for yourself. No fees charged where satisfaction is not met. Apply, etc.

I showed him the printout. I hadn't seen him smile like that since I'd told him my name. Remember, I'm a first-class second-class con man; although I had to strangle my basic instincts to dupe people into thinking it might cost them when it wouldn't. It's a Bizarro world, as I said. I e-mailed the text to all the sheets, then opened the dictionary program Lyon had installed for me and decided "emolument" is a good word.

That was Thursday. On Friday we had our first client.

Raymond Nurls's percentage of body fat wouldn't have fried a lox in Gus's skillet. In his three-button black suit he made a dividing line in the center of the guest chair, which was another of those areas where Lyon's attempt to clone Nero Wolfe's life had gone south. He'd hired a color-blind upholsterer, who covered it in orange. It clashed with the scarlet in the Mandan rug like our two cultures.

Nurls was halfway through his twenties but well on his way toward crabby old age, with hair mowed to the edge of baldness and a silver chain clipped to the legs of his glasses. He steepled his hands when he spoke.

"I assumed from your advertisement you're either a detective or a magician. Which is it?"

Lyon tried to lower his lids, but he was too jazzed by the prospect of work to keep them from flapping back up. "I don't pull rabbits out of hats, but I can tell you how it's done."

I leaned forward in my chair, where I was taking notes. "That means he's a detective."

"Very good. I'm the executive director of the American Poetical Association. Perhaps you've heard of it."

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But unless it appeared on *Days of Our Lives* or in his complete run of Doubleday Crime Club editions lining the back wall of the office, Lyon hadn't, so Nurls filled us in. The A.P.A. was an organization devoted to art patronage, specifically for poets who'd missed the memo that the road to starvation begins with the purchase of one's first rhyming dictionary. Its purpose was to mooch money from people who'd run out of places to store it and provide grants to support promising talent until their work was ready for publication. To me it seemed cruel to jolly them along only to cut them loose just when their unsold copies were on the way back to the pulp mill, but then I sort of lost interest after the part about separating the rich from their wealth, so I may have missed some of the fine points.

Once a year, the association threw a dinner in a hotel in Canarsie, where the winner of the coveted Van Dusen Prize for Outstanding Poetry received a plaque and a check for ten thousand dollars. I imagine that mollified some landlord.

At this point Lyon swooped in for the kill. "Which was stolen, the plaque or the check?"

"Neither."

Lyon yelled for cream soda.

"I'm new to the association," said Hurls, when Gus left with his empty tray. "I replaced the executive director who'd been with the A.P.A. since the beginning, who retired rather suddenly to Arizona on the advice of his cardiac specialist. My first duty is to plan this year's dinner, which will commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of our founding. Naturally I spent a great deal of time on the phone with my predecessor, gathering historical details to include in the program: names of charter members, events of note, et cetera. Naturally, a complete list of past winners of the Van Dusen Prize was essential."

Walter Van Dusen, it developed, was a prominent industrialist who'd aspired toward culture, and upon his death had left an endowment that made the cash incentive possible. Before that, the winners had taken home a plaque only, presumably to boil the sap from to make soup.

"When I came aboard," Nurls went on, "the records situation was rustic, to put it charitably. The old fellow had taken them with him, for reasons of his own; I picture a loose-leaf notebook in his personal shorthand. I rang him up in Phoenix, and he proceeded to read off the winners' names, and contact information where it existed. I thought it would be a grand gesture to invite as many of them as were available to attend the dinner as guests of the A.P.A."

He related the tragic circumstances: Of twenty-four former winning poets, eleven could not be located, six had died from natural causes, three had committed suicide, and two weren't interested;

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one, over, the telephone, had been emphatic on the subject to the point of questioning the details of Raymond Nurls's ancestry.

One of the pair remaining was too elderly to make the trip. The last was willing, but required mileage and accommodations. These the executive director agreed to provide, since the budget to feed the past anointed was untouched. "I'm concerned chiefly with one of the names on the list," Nurls said. "A gentleman named Noah Ward."

"Dead, disgruntled, or unlocatable?" Lyon asked.

"The last. So far I've been unable to learn anything about him. I did a computer search on the name, but none of the matches I came up with applies. I was able to narrow it down to three who have any connection with literary endeavour, but one is far too young—he would have been in junior high the year Ward was honored, and our prize committee is not disposed to recognize precociousness—another, the editor of the book-review page of a Baltimore literary journal, assured me he'd never written poetry and didn't review it because, quote, 'I wouldn't know a grand epic from subway doggerel,' unquote. The third, who self-publishes suspense fiction, assured me he'd never heard of the A.P.A. I rang off when he attempted to sell me a book. *Blood Boulevard,* I believe, was the title." He adjusted his glasses.

Lyon shifted his weight, evidently in sympathetic discomfort with this last piece of intelligence. Actually he was trying to burst a bubble in his gut, which he did, with spectacular results. In a belching contest I'd put every cent I've embezzled from him on his nose. "Why this obsession with one name on the list?"

"Because Ward is the only one on it I've been unable to confirm ever existed."

"Ah."

Encouraged, the executive director steepled his hands higher.

"Nary a birth certificate nor a social security card nor a school transcript nor an arrest record nor so much as a ticket for overtime parking. Really, Mr. Lyons—"

"Lyon. I am singular, not plural."

"I stand corrected. It's next to impossible, not to say impossible, to exist in today's world without leaving a footprint of some kind on the Internet. Therefore I propose that Noah Ward never existed."

"And this is significant because—"

"You're a detective. Figure it out. Whoever claimed that ten-thousand-dollar prize under a fictitious name is guilty of grand fraud."

"I assume you've ruled out the likelihood of a pseudonym."

"At once. The rules of the American Poetical Association expressly state that all work must be submitted under the contestant's legal name. The provision was adopted to prevent them from submitting more than one work for consideration. A long lead time was established between the deadline and the announcement of the winner to investigate the identities of all the contributors."

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"Your predecessor could not enlighten you on the details?"

Nurls jammed his glasses farther into his head. "He perished last week, in a fire that consumed his condominium, himself, and any records that might have furnished additional information. The disaster was entirely accidental," he added quickly. "Investigators with the fire department traced it to a faulty electrical circuit."

"Unfortunate and tragic. I assume you polled the membership for reminiscences? The committee responsible for the honor springs to mind."

"Our rolls run toward an older demographic. Everyone who might have shed light upon the selection has passed. The one member I managed to reach who was present at that dinner is an unreliable source." He touched his left temple.

"Dear me. All the powers appear to have aligned themselves against you. Is it your intention to bring legal action for the recovery of the ten thousand?"

"It is. The association has empowered me, upon filing formal charges, to remit fifteen percent to the party who identifies and exposes the guilty person. Expenses added, of course." Nurls sat back a tenth of an inch, folding his hands on his spare middle.

Lyon finished his cream soda in one long draft and patted his lips. He replaced the pocket square with all the ceremony of a color guard folding the flag. "I accept the challenge, Mr. Nurls. We'll discuss payment upon success or an admission of failure. In the latter event, I will accept no remuneration."

I had to hand it to the little balloon. He'd managed to appear professional and hold off the wrath of the State of New York in one elegant speech. I knew him then for a liar when he said he couldn't pull a rabbit out of a hat. But the bean counter in the ugly orange chair wouldn't have taken the Holy Annunciation at face value. He'd have asked the angel for references, and followed up on them through Google.

"How do I know you can deliver?" he said. "Forgive me, but all I have to go on is three lines in the *Times*."

Lyon looked at the clock. "It's nearly lunchtime. Blood soup, with a stock combined of livers and gizzards; free-range goose, of course. Cheese blintzes for dessert and a fine Manischewitz from my cellar. Once you've sampled the fare of my table, you'll be in a better position to judge my success in this profession. Will you join us?"

Nurls declined, looking a shade green around the collar; but he was hooked. Me too, from then on. A first-rate, second-rate grifter knows a champ when he sees one.

"Phooey!" said Lyon, when I suggested checking the Library of Congress for poetical compositions copyrighted under the name Noah Ward. (Wolfe says "Pfui," but his disciple has trouble pronouncing the labial.) "It's futile to attempt to prove a man does not

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exist. It expends energy the way trying to add light to dark expends paint, with no appreciable effect. We will assume as a hypothesis that Nurls is right and Ward is a chimera."

"How'd you know that about paint?" I asked.

"I investigated the phenomenon of temporary employment the summer I turned fifteen. A less than august August." He dismissed the subject with a wave of his little finger. "A check was issued to Noah Ward, and someone had to cash it. The transaction took place too far in the past for any bank to retain a record of it, even if we found the bank and its personnel were willing to cooperate. March down to the police station and inquire whether anyone using that name or something similar has ever been arrested for bunco steering."

"These days they just call it fraud."

"Indeed? Colorless. A pity."

"Ever's a long way to comb back, even if I could get them to do it."

"Concentrate on the past seven years. I assume that's still the statute of limitations for most crimes. A man who draws water once may be expected to return to the well the next time he thirsts. Perhaps he wasn't so successful the second time."

"What if the well isn't in Brooklyn?"

"Start here. Until he has the money in hand, a poet is unlikely to come by the travel expenses necessary to collect."

I have cop friends. I'd been down there often enough to strike up acquaintances and I have a good line of gab, which they like almost as much as Krispy Kremes and are apt to disregard a little thing like a felony record of the nonviolent kind in order to enjoy it. I cast my line and caught a big fish, although I didn't know it at the time and would have thrown it back if I had.

It was Friday night. For religious reasons Gus couldn't clock in again until after sundown Saturday, and unlike his hero, Lyon is capable of burning a salad, so I fixed him two boxes of mac-and-cheese in the microwave and made myself a BLT. I can keep kosher as well as the next guy, but every so often I get a craving for swine and shellfish that has to be addressed.

We were just finishing up when the doorbell rang. It rang again before we remembered Gus couldn't answer it. By the time I got to the door, our visitor had abandoned ringing for banging. I used the peephole and hustled back to the dining room.

"It's cops," I said. "Actually only one, but what he lacks in number he makes up for in mean."

Lyon glared up at me from his tilted bowl. I shook my head innocently. I hadn't tried to sell anyone an autographed *Portable Chaucer* in six months.

I brought Captain Stoddard into the office, where Lyon was just sitting down behind the desk. I was halfway through introductions

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when he brought his fist down on the leather top. "Where do you get off sending this cheap crook to my precinct? I've put every officer who gave him the time of day on report."

"Please have a seat, sir. I have spinal issues that make it agony to tilt my head back more than three degrees." His tone wobbled a little. He seemed to have authority issues as well, but I gave him points for the show of spunk. Stoddard did too, maybe, or maybe he'd been on report himself too many times that fiscal period for pushing around citizens. Anyway he sat.

Physically, he's the opposite of Nero Wolfe's nemesis in NYC Homicide. Inspector Cramer is beefy where Captain Stoddard is gaunt, and the captain's a few more years away from mandatory retirement, but he filled the orange chair with nastiness the way Cramer fills the famous red one with buttock. Stoddard commands the local precinct. I was trying out the straight-and-narrow as much to avoid another interrogation by him as to stay out of jail.

"Woodbine left your name," he told Lyon. "So far I can't find a record under it, but if you're partnered up with this little goldbrick artist I'll start one for you personally. What kind of scam you got going that involves turning the Brooklyn Police Department into an information service?"

"I pay taxes, Mr. Stoddard. If you look up my name outside your rogues' gallery, you may be able to figure out how much. But even the poorest resident of this country has the right to consult the police when he suspects a law has been broken."

He gulped, but he got it out. It was a good speech, too. The proof was in the way the man he spoke it to didn't haul him out of his chair and slam-dunk him into his own recycling bin. Instead his nails made little semicircles in the pumpkin-colored leather.

"I monitor all the computers in the precinct," he growled. "Some cops think that when I step out they can fool around in the files and get away with it. They always fold when I jump them. Who's this bird Ward?"

Courage has its limits. Lyon looked to me for support, but I was scareder than he was, with experience to justify it. He took a couple of deep breaths to prevent hyperventilating and told Stoddard everything Raymond Nurls had told us. He'd barely finished when the captain sprang to his feet with an Anglo-Saxon outburst that knocked out of line the picture on the wall next to the elevator shaft. I'd thought only the elevator could do that.

"A puzzle!" he roared. "My precinct has murders to investigate, rapes, child abuse, armed robbery, each of which requires three weeks minimum to make an arrest and a case to make it stick, not counting petty little interruptions like burglary, purse-snatching, and assault, and you take up twenty minutes of that time playing Scrabble."

"You're being metaphorical, of course," Lyon put in. "Fraud is

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not a parlor game."

The fist came down, jumping a pen out of its little onyx skull. Lyon jumped and looked ill. "A cheesy award given out by a bunch of nances for the best ode on a Greek pot. No!" Fist. The pen rolled to the edge of Lyon's blotter.

The little butterball surprised me. Ever since Stoddard had jumped up he'd been doing his best to shrink himself inside his folds of suet, like an armadillo gathering itself into a ball. Now his eyes opened wide and he straightened himself in his chair, tilting his head back two degrees past agony to meet the glare of his tormentor. "Would you repeat what you just said?"

Stoddard wound back the tape a little too far, back to the unbroadcastable word that had brought him out of his chair.

"After that," Lyon said. His tone was as steady as the tide. "After I questioned your choice of the word Scrabble."

"An award! A cheesy award!" The captain shouted into his face, flecks of spittle spattering him from his hairline to the knot of his green silk tie. "Are you deaf, too? I *know* you're dumb!"

"Thank you, Mr. Stoddard. You are a synaptical savant."

That silenced him. It silenced me, too, until I looked up both words on the dictionary program. He straightened, looking around.

"Where's your investigator's license? You're supposed to display it prominently."

"I haven't one."

Stoddard's bony face twisted to make room for a horse-toothed grin. It wasn't nice. He isn't a nice man, nor even a good one.

He lowered his tone to conversational level; he might have been bidding four, no trump. "Do you know what the penalty is in this state for conducting professional investigations without a license?"

"I've never had cause to look it up. A professional would be well-advised to do so, but I don't charge for my services. My amateur standing remains intact."

The horse teeth receded. Stoddard's BB eyes darted left, then right. That put me inside range. "What about Woodbine? Don't tell me he works for you for free. He'd walk to Albany and back for the left-handed dollar."

"I employ Mr. Woodbine to obtain the information I require to pursue my avocation."

"That's investigation. You need a license to earn a salary."

"Tish-tush."

I gave Lyon double points for that; thumbing his nose to authority while employing a phrase alien to his inspiration. At his insistence I'd made a sizeable dent in his Rex Stout library, and had not once come across it. Somewhere in that roly-poly wad of derivative claptrap was an authentic original waiting to be recognized, as well as a tough little nut. "When a personal assistant is asked to pick up the telephone and inquire when a bank closes, is he conducting an

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illegal investigation or running an errand? Is it your desire to give up your day off to answer that question at a public hearing?"

I never found out if Stoddard had an answer for that.

He opened his mouth, presumably to let out a four-letter opinion of the question that had been put to him, but he closed it. Lyon's eyes were shut tight, and he was foraging inside his left ear like an anteater.

Nero Wolfe never sums up a case without an audience. It can contain a handful or a horde, but it rarely gathers outside his personal throne room, where the Great Detective holds forth from behind the massive desk on West 35th Street, New York, New York. Claudius Lyon would have it no other way, even if the venue was his office of many compromises in Brooklyn, and his spectators restricted to four.

Stoddard was present, eager to make his case to prosecute Lyon and me for conducting a private investigation without a license, as well as fraud, and of course Raymond Nurls was invited. My seat, turned from my desk, was a perk of the job, but I couldn't see any reason why Gus was there, except to fill one more seat in a show that needed a solid third act if it weren't to be left to die on the road. It had taken all of Lyon's powers of persuasion to convince Gus that he wouldn't burn in hell for sitting in. Just to make sure, Gus sat in the green chair nearest the door, where he could escape if anyone asked him to turn on a light or something. Nurls's thin frame bisected another green chair, and Stoddard deposited his hundred and seventy pounds of pure hostility in the orange.

Lyon entered last, straightened the picture on the wall, scowled at the pea-size green tomato growing at the end of the vine in the pot on his desk, and sat down. "Thank you all for coming. Does anyone object to Mr. Woodbine taking notes?"

Nurls shook his head, the silver chain swaying on his glasses. Stoddard scooped a small portable cassette recorder out of his pocket and balanced it on his knee. "Just in case he misses something culpable."

Lyon shrugged and cracked open the can I'd placed on the desk. He took a slug and began.

"Mr. Nurls. When was the Van Dusen Prize first presented?"

"Fifteen years ago this fall. It was presented to—"

"The A.P.A. was then ten years old?"

"Yes. I don't see what this has to do with Noah Ward. He wasn't honored until years later."

"I will establish relevance presently. I suppose it goes without saying that before the existence of the ten-thousand-dollar honorarium, the honor was not referred to as a prize."

"It does, and yet you said it. A prize without a prize is hardly a prize."

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"Poetically put. How, then, was it referred to?"

"It was called the Golden Muse Award. The plaque still contains an etching in gold of its mythological subject."

"During our first conversation, you said the man you replaced as executive director had held that position since the A.P.A. was founded, is that correct?"

"Yes. Really, Mr. Lyon—"

Stoddard interrupted. "I'm with him. Connect this to the scam artist who conned the sissies out of a bundle."

"I beg your pardon, sir. That is not my intention."

Even Gus took his eyes off his escape route to look up at Lyon. Stoddard and Nurls started talking at once. I gave up trying to get it all down.

A pudgy palm came up for silence; he broke it himself when his voice squeaked. "I have been engaged to untangle the mystery that surrounds the elusive Noah Ward. I shall now proceed to do so. Mr. Nurls, when you spoke with your predecessor on the telephone, did he call the Van Dusen Prize by that name?"

Nurls started to speak, then adjusted his glasses and started again. "No. As a matter of fact, he just called it 'the award.' I assume he did so out of habit."

"Not unusual for one long familiar with the original. How did he read off the names of past winners?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did he say, 'The Golden Muse Award in nineteen eighty-eight went to Joe Doakes,' 'The Golden Muse Award in nineteen eighty-nine went to Jane Doe,' and so on and so forth?"

"Certainly not. The conversation would have been interminable. He provided the year and the name in each instance, and I wrote them down."

Lyon drank, burped, wiped. "One of my abandoned interests is the history of the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. I gave up the study when it became clear that the board at Columbia University would never honor Rex Stout, or more appropriately Archie Goodwin for his many contributions to American letters. I do recall that in nineteen forty, when the director of the board objected to the others' choice of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* it was decided that no prize would be issued that year. Are you aware if this ever happened in regard to the Van Dusen Prize or the Golden Muse?"

"It never did. The former executive director read off twenty-four years and twenty-four names. This year's winner has not yet been determined."

"I submit that it happened, and that he told you as much when he used the phrase you misunderstood for a man's name. The three syllables you interpreted as 'Noah Ward,' had they been spelled out, would in fact read—"

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"No award." Nurls slumped in his seat. I hadn't thought his spine had that much play in it.

Stoddard shot to his feet. His tape recorder slid off his knee to the floor. "You took up my precinct's time and mine over a dumb-ass pun?"

"A homonym, to be precise. A hazard of oral communication."

"You and Woodbine are both under arrest for obstruction of justice."

Lyon's moon face was gray as cardboard, but he held his ground. "Don't be absurd, Mr. Stoddard. I've prevented Mr. Nurls from obstructing justice unwittingly by filing a nuisance complaint. If there never was a Noah Ward, no fraud was committed, and the A.P.A. simply reinvested the money that would have been awarded, assuring the continued existence of the Van Dusen Prize. I have you to thank for a signal accomplishment on my part."

"Don't drag me into it, you little blimp."

"No dragging is necessary. Earlier today in this very room, you referred to the Van Dusen as an award, not a prize, and employed an emphatic 'No' to indicate your rejection of the importance of the affair to the Brooklyn Police Department. You may have noticed that at that point I entered into a reverie."

"You stuck your finger in your ear."

"I find the action stimulates the cortex. Granted you hadn't a notion you were supplying a catalyst for the chemistry of my cognitive function, but that in no way diminishes your role in the outcome."

"Bull. Since when is wordplay a signal accomplishment?"

"I must thank you again, for putting the question. In spite of the laws of physics, I have managed to change a tint of paint by adding a small amount of light to dark. I have proven that someone never existed."

Nurls produced a checkbook, scribbled, and got up to place the check on Claudius Lyon's desk. "Two thousand, including a bonus for a job well done. You *are* a magician."

Captain Stoddard hovered. I wouldn't say he drooled, but he was ready to pounce the second Lyon picked up the check. The man behind the desk never looked at it. Instead he turned to me. "Arnie, will you do the honors?"

I said I'd be pleased as punch. Nurls watched, astonished, Stoddard, boiling, as I tore the check sideways and lengthwise and dropped the pieces into the wastebasket by my desk.

Stoddard slammed the door behind him, knocking crooked the picture on the wall. Lyon said goodbye to our client, rose, and straightened it on his way to the elevator. ●

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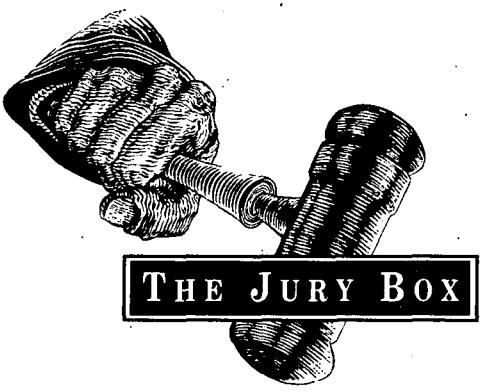

by Jon L. Breen

Show business has long been a favorite criminous setting, and in recent years more mysteries than ever have explored the worlds of film, stage, television, music, magic, stand-up comedy, and other categories of performance. Prolific anthologist Robert J. Randisi's *Hollywood and Crime* (Pegasus, $25) gathers original stories by such formidable writers as Michael Connelly, Bill Pronzini, Terence Faherty, Stuart M. Kaminsky, and Dick Lochte. Among those with the strongest entertainment industry backgrounds are "Murderlized" by Max Allan Collins and Matthew V. Clemens, a fact-based 1930s tale in which Moe Howard of the Three Stooges investigates the mysterious death of former stage partner Ted Healy; Robert S. Levinson's "And the Winner Is," about the 1960 Academy Awards, gangster Mickey Cohen, and the bitter rivalry of columnists Hedda Hopper and Louella O. Parsons; and best of all, "Jack Webb's Star," Lee Goldberg's hilarious contemporary tale of a struggling TV writer, his commercial actress wife, a traffic school led by an unfunny stand-up comic, and Joe Friday's star on the Hollywood Boulevard Walk of Fame. The novels considered below explore other corners of the entertainment world past and present.

**** Christa Faust: *Money Shot,* Hard Case Crime, $6.99. Former porn movie actress Angel Dare, who now operates an "adult modeling agency," should never have agreed to a one-time comeback that leaves her battered, humiliated, and on the run from a murder charge. Her story of sex, violence, and Spillane-style revenge is leavened by humanity, occasional humor, sex-industry insights, faultless pace, and eloquent style. Some will be repelled by the subject matter, but to those remaining, this is highly recommended. The dedication to the late paperback icon Richard S. Prather is quite appropriate.

*** Betty Webb: *Desert Cut,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. Lena

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Jones, a Scottsdale private eye with the personal demons and mysterious history so common in the current market, appears for the fifth time in this disturbing novel. Most of her income comes from her job as technical advisor to a television crime drama. Thus, when she and her documentarian boyfriend find the body of a little girl while scouting locations for a film about Geronimo, she is able to take on the case, possibly connected to those of other missing girls, without a paying client. While the extreme child abuse at the center of the plot is painfully believable and buttressed by an author note and bibliography, one hopes the jaundiced view of TV series production is exaggerated. Webb is a solid pro who knows how to draw in and keep the reader.

*** Toni L. P. Kelner: *Without Mercy,* Five Star, $25.95. In the first of a promising new series, Boston entertainment writer Tilda Harper, specialist in where-are-they-now stories, looks into suspicious deaths among the cast members of the 1970s sitcom *Kissing Cousins* while trying to find the vanished Mercy, the program's goth teenager. Bright dialogue, engaging characters, and a humorous view of fannish obsession support a whodunit plot that is nicely managed though unclued in the classical sense.

*** David Fulmer: *The Blue Door,* Harcourt, $25. The author of several mysteries centered on early twentieth-century jazz turns to the Philadelphia music scene of 1962 as boxer turned private eye in training Eddie Cero looks into the disappearance three years earlier of rising rhythm-and-blues star Johnny Pope. Almost everyone, including Johnny's beautiful sister, wants him to leave it alone. Though the payoff isn't quite as good as the problem, characters and background make this one a winner. Eddie's relationship with employer and mentor Sal Giambroni may remind some of Fredric Brown's 1947 Edgar winner *The Fabulous Clipjoint.*

*** Robert S. Levinson: *In the Key of Death,* Five Star, $25.95. Record producer Clyde (Mr. Magic) Davenport so resents being dropped by the popular music giants he made famous that he is systematically killing them off. LAPD cop Josh Wainwright, whose singer wife may have been one of Davenport's victims, is determined to avenge her death. *EQMM* favorite Levinson manages to have both a pernicious known villain and a whodunit in an intricately plotted and suspenseful thriller that makes maximum use of his music industry expertise.

*** John Harvey: *Gone to Ground,* Harcourt, $25. Occasional excerpts from the script of a 1950s British film noir hint that the murder of a gay academic arose from his research into the female star, who died mysteriously and whose family resists cooperation. Most interesting feature of the first book-length case for police detectives Will Grayson and Helen Walker is Harvey's depiction of the tri-

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angle, benign and friendly but potentially dangerous, of male detective, wife, and female partner.

*** Bill Moody: *Shades of Blue,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. When Bay Area jazz pianist Evan Horne, making his sixth appearance, inherits the home and possessions of his musical mentor Calvin Hughes, some pieces of old handwritten sheet music and a photograph of Hughes with Miles Davis and a baby carriage send the sleuthing jazzman on a quest for the dead man's secrets. The unconventional and seldom predictable plot takes a while to get fully in gear, but Moody, himself a professional jazz drummer, quickly involves the reader with both the characters and the music. Included as incidental characters are real-life drummer Roy Haynes and bassist Ron Carter.

** Susan Goodwill: *Little Shop of Murders,* Midnight Ink, $13.95. Kate London's amateur theatre in Mudd Lake, Michigan mounts the musical comedy *Little Shop of Horrors,* complete with hard-to-control man-eating plant. During the town's annual Sausage Festival, an elderly bathrobe-wearing bank robber proves to be a boyfriend of Kate's Aunt Kitty, a former '50s-era B-movie actress. Representing the comic cozy at its lightest and slapstickiest, this may satisfy some fans of the type but won't win many new converts.

** Don Bruns: *St. Bart Breakdown,* Oceanview, $24.95. In his fourth appearance, rock journalist Mick Sever flies to the titular island to interview legendary record producer Danny Murtz, a drug-addled sociopath whose female friends have a habit of vanishing or turning up dead. The island and journalistic backgrounds are effective enough, but the characters and plot are less engaging than hoped.

ADDENDUM: By bizarre coincidence, the very day I learned of the death of my friend and literary hero Ed Hoch, I found in my mailbox the seventeenth (and certainly not last) edition of the loose-leaf *Edward D. Hoch Bibliography* (Moffatt House, Box 4456, Downey, CA 90241-1456), covering the years 1955 to early 2008. Edited by June M. Moffatt and Francis M. Nevins, and including extensive introductory material by Marvin Lachman, it is a testament to the extraordinary career of a writer who first broke into print with "Village of the Dead" in the December 1955 issue of one of the last surviving mystery pulps, *Famous Detective Stories;* had been a frequent contributor to *EQMM* for nearly a decade before beginning his historic unbroken run of appearances from May 1973 to the present; created no less than 28 mystery series; and was one of the last and greatest practitioners of classical Golden-Age-style detective fiction. Apart from the hundreds of meticulously crafted stories that form his literary legacy, Ed Hoch was loved and admired in the mystery field for his good humor, kindness, generosity to other writers, and wisdom. The memories and the stories live on. ○

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Art by Mark Evan Wolker

FORGET ME NEVER

by Terence Faherty

"You've been wanting to do an article on those damn roadside memorials," Boxleiter said. "Here's your big chance."

E. N. Boxleiter was my longtime editor at the *Star Republic,* the Indianapolis newspaper where I spent my days and many of my nights, and I'd learned to give his big chances a very critical examination, kicking their tires and looking into their mouths both. Not that it ever did me much good in the end.

Take the current example. As it happened, I had wanted to do a story on roadside memorials set up for accident victims, the homemade shrines that had become such a common sight around Indiana. The memorials were the heart's work of some loving survivor of a person killed in a car or truck or motorcycle accident, and the earliest ones—the ones I'd first noticed—had been simple wooden crosses wired to a guardrail or mile marker or just stuck in the grass of a berm. Over the years the designs had evolved like the Christmas-light displays of competitive neighbors. Now they commonly featured plastic wreaths, stuffed animals, and photos of the deceased.

I was never able to pass one without wondering about the phenomenon. Specifically, I always asked myself why the spot where a loved one had met a violent end seemed to be so much more meaningful to

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some industrious mourner than the victim's grave, the more traditional lodestone of grief.

I'd gone as far as contacting a friend who taught cultural anthropology at Lockerbie University, a local private college. She'd told me of ante-cedents to the memorials that went all the way back to the Middle Ages, when it had been a common practice to erect roadside shrines for travelers killed by bandits. And she'd shared her pet theory that the roots of the practice were sunk even deeper. Despite the cross motif, she believed the shrines might spring from some racial memory of a time before the Christian concept of heaven became established. That explained to her satisfaction the focus on the site of death rather than the grave. It had been the last known whereabouts on earth of the dearly departed's spirit and therefore a likely spot for that spirit to hang around.

Terence Faherty is the author of two mystery series at novel length that have also had short-story entries in this magazine (the Owen Keane and Scott Elliott stories.) The following story belongs to what he calls his Star Republic series, about a newspaper reporter who has an interest in offbeat crimes. To date, it has only run in *EQMM*.

All of which might have made for an interesting feature article, if my editor had been interested in a simple feature. From me at least, Boxleiter expected something more offbeat. Something bizarre or with a scent of mystery. And now his pleased expression told me he had caught a whiff of that scent.

"Take a look," he said, pushing a Polaroid snapshot across his desk. He was holding four others with their backs to me, like a gambler stretching out a pat hand.

The photograph on the desktop was a close-up of a pretty typical roadside shrine: a white cross with a framed portrait attached to its intersection. The photo within the photo appeared to be of a smiling young woman, but it was very small. Above it, stick-on letters of the type used on mailboxes spelled the name Maria. A vase containing flowers was wired to the bottom of the cross.

Because I could see that the prints my boss still held each had a notation on the back, I turned over the one he'd dealt me. In smudged felt tip was written, "I-70 westbound near the 94 mile marker."

I waited for the punchline, and Boxleiter laid the other photos down, almost reluctantly. I thought at first that they were four different shots of the same memorial. Each showed a white cross bearing the name Maria, the same framed black-and-white photo, and the same glass vase. Each vase contained the same bouquet. The slight differences in the lighting of each shot could have been due to their having been taken at different times of day. But then I noticed some significant variations in the backgrounds. The mile-

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post just visible in the original photo didn't appear in any of the four near-duplicates. And one of the four clearly showed a bit of guardrail where there shouldn't have been any.

To confirm the likeliest explanation, I checked the backs of the prints. Sure enough, each had a different location smeared there. One was I-70 eastbound at the 94 mile marker, putting its shrine right across four lanes of interstate from the one I'd first examined. Another was Shadeland Avenue at Tenth Street. The remaining two were I-65 southbound near the Keystone exit and I-465, Indy's beltway, westbound near the exit for State Road 67, on the city's southwest side.

Boxleiter was nodding. "Exactly. Five identical memorials to a woman identified only by her first name. The Polaroids were taken by a highway maintenance guy named Halleck. He noticed the two on I-70 because that's on his normal grass-cutting route. They got him so interested, he talked them up back at the highway garage and another grass cutter mentioned the one on I-465. After that, Halleck spent a Saturday afternoon driving around town. He found the other crosses, photographed them, and sent us the results.

"He's a man after my own heart, this Halleck," Boxleiter concluded. "He wants an explanation. So do I."

I reached Halleck, first name Alan, in the cab of his tractor, thanks to the miracle of cellular communications. He agreed to meet me at the first cross he'd found, the one on I-70 westbound at the 94 mile marker.

On my drive from downtown, I used my own cell phone to reach my friend the Lockerbie cultural anthropologist. Professor Constance Brewster—Connie when we'd been undergraduates together—was about to leave for a lecture. I gave her a quick description of the mystery shrines and asked for a quick opinion.

"Fakes, obviously," she said in her decisive way. "The question is, why would anyone bother? You say these memorials are basically big white crosses? That's interesting. You know, ever since the courts started ruling against religious displays on public property—manger scenes, Ten Commandment plaques, or whatever—I've been expecting some kind of grass-roots reaction. This could be an example of that. The highways are public land, after all. Some religious activist could be setting these up as a way of thumbing his nose at the court rulings. Who's going to tear down a memorial to an accident victim?"

I asked her why, if these were protests, they all featured the same photo and name.

"Why not?" Connie asked back. "Maybe it's to make them recognizable to the faithful. Wait a minute, you said the name was Maria? Could that photograph have been a picture of the Virgin Mary? They can do some amazing things with computer graphics these days. It could be Our Lady of Czestochowa with Cindy Crawford's hair pasted on. Check it out and get back to me."

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Alan Halleck's mowing rig was parked on the shoulder of the interstate when I arrived. I pulled well onto the grass myself, but I still felt my car shake as a semi rumbled past.

"You get used to that," Halleck said when I finally ventured outside the car. "The crazy traffic. It's like working around a big buzz saw or in a fireworks factory. You have to put the danger out of your mind or you can't do your job."

Halleck was a young, muscular guy dressed in work boots, khaki shorts, and a green YMCA shirt. He was tanned to make a dermatologist cry, though his eyes were well protected by mirrored sunglasses that would not have looked out of place in a Ferrari. The shades were hooked behind ears that might have won him the nickname jughead in a less sensitive time and supported by a square, flat nose. His sun-lightened hair was also square, his flattop as perfectly manicured as any country-club green.

"There's another occupational hazard," he said, pointing to the shrine to the mysterious Maria. "You can't just mow over them. I mean, you could, but it wouldn't seem right. I mow around them until the grass gets too high. Then I stop, pull them out, mow, and stick them back in. A real pain."

The cross was taller than I'd judged from the Polaroid, almost four feet high. The picture at its center, which was enclosed in a dime-store frame, was a five by seven. The print's quality was so poor that it might have been done on a Xerox machine, but it didn't appear to have been altered or doctored in any way. It certainly didn't resemble any image of the Blessed Virgin I'd ever seen. That it might have been a high-school graduation picture was suggested by the subject's age and the appealing openness of her smile and her wide dark eyes.

"I might never have noticed the duplication if I hadn't taken the time to trim around this one," Halleck was saying. "They all look a little alike, these cross things. But the picture of the girl caught my eye. She's a real cutie. A Mexican beauty, as the song says. It'd be a shame if she was really dead."

I asked Halleck why he thought she might not be.

"It's got to be a fake, right? You can't die in five different places; I don't care how bad the wreck is. When I finally got around to noticing that there was an identical cross on the other side"—he pointed toward the eastbound lanes, which were cut off from view at that point by a grove of trees—"I thought, okay, she died on the median and the trees make that a bad place for a memorial, so her family put one on each side. Or maybe her papa uses this road to commute and he wanted to remember her coming and going.

"But then I mentioned them to Bud Bishop, who mows down on I-465, and he told me about the one down there. He'd gotten a little sweet on Maria himself, seeing her picture every couple of weeks. That started me hunting around. By the time I found the fifth cross, I knew something else was going on."

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A little convoy of trucks passed just then, interrupting Halleck. Or giving him the perfect opportunity to pause for added suspense. I could tell he had a theory he was dying to impart. When the truck noise died away, I asked him about it.

He removed his sunglasses, revealing blue eyes surrounded by relatively undamaged skin. "I think little Maria's got herself a stalker. I think some guy who's hot for her, maybe some guy she's dumped, is setting these things up where he knows she'll see them. Like threats, you know. Come back to me or it's RIP. The trouble is, the jerk didn't blow the photo up big enough. They're so small you can't really make out the face from the highway. Maria could be driving past them every day and still not know the danger she's in.

"What you have to do is run Maria's picture in the paper. Get her to come forward so we can talk to her. Warn her, I mean."

I noted the "we" and wondered if Maria might be well on her way to having a second stalker. I knew how Boxleiter would react to the idea of running a dating service, so I took the conversation in a new direction by asking Halleck when the white crosses had first appeared.

"Not all that long ago. This one wasn't here back in the early spring when I was having to cut this stretch every week. And then I cut around it for a while before I climbed down that first time to move it. So it might have been put up four weeks or so ago. Around the end of June."

Even that vague date would be useful in identifying the fatal accident, assuming, as I did, that Halleck's stalker theory was wishful thinking. He gave it another try after I'd thanked him and told him I'd be in touch.

"Take a good look at that picture. That's a girl men fall in love with. If you talk to her, remember I saw her first."

I was on my way back downtown to sift through accident reports when I decided instead to get off the highway at Shadeland Avenue and visit the only shrine to Maria that wasn't on an interstate. Not that I saw any significance in that. I was only looking for the visit to delay some tedious desk work. As it turned out, it eliminated that step completely.

The Shadeland cross was stuck in a weedy island of grass that divided the avenue's three badly paved northbound lanes from its three equally cracked southbound lanes. I parked on the apron of a defunct Shell station and approached the cross on foot. Even before I'd reached the safety of the median, I could tell that Halleck's photo hadn't lied. This shrine was an exact duplicate of the one I'd just left, right down to the bouquet of white plastic flowers in its vase.

I was trying, idly, to identify those flowers when a police siren, blaring out behind me, almost shot me into the northbound traffic. Then a Marion County sheriff's department cruiser slid to a halt beside me, every light flashing.

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The woman who climbed out was in such a hurry she had trouble settling her Canadian Mountie-style hat on her head. "Hold it!" she shouted, and then, "Damn."

The last comment was a sign of recognition. Like most reporters, I knew my share of policemen and women. I knew Deputy Sheila Gilkey all too well. She was an avid marathon runner whose opinion of the press was even lower than her percentage of body fat.

"I should have known you'd sniff this out sooner or later," she said.

I accepted the compliment graciously, not mentioning all the sniffing done for me by Alan Halleck. I was thinking that Gilkey knew all about Halleck, that he'd sent a duplicate set of his Polaroids to the sheriff's department. The question she asked next told me this wasn't the case.

"Who's onto this besides me and you?"

I told her the *Star Republic* had been tipped by an alert reader and showed her the five photos. She examined them at length, ignoring the traffic backup created by her parked cruiser.

"Your nosy reader missed one," she finally said. "On Post Road just south of Pendleton Pike. It was the first one I saw. I'd been going out there almost every day on one of my regular cases." Gilkey worked in the county's domestic-violence unit. "I had every inch of that route memorized, including a white cross with Maria printed on it. Then I'm down on the south side near 67, on my way to take a deposition, and I see an identical cross on I-465. Couldn't believe my eyes. Had to drive back up to Post Road to make sure the original one was still there."

She went on to explain what I'd already guessed: She'd made an off-duty tour of the city, searching for other white crosses. It was surprising that she and Halleck hadn't crossed paths.

"Have you IDed her?" Gilkey asked, pushing her Mountie hat back to reveal a little of the bowl-cut brown hair that matched the brown of her uniform shirt so exactly she might have been dyeing it to departmental specs. I could tell by the look in her slightly protruding eyes—also regulation brown—that she had identified Maria. I could also tell that she was dying to tell someone, even a troublesome reporter. And I understood that. The more interesting the story, the greater the pressure to give it away.

"Her name is Maria Felez," Gilkey said. "I won't tell you how many of my free evenings that cost me. I spent them going through accident reports looking for Marias and then tracking down photographs. It was a break from dealing with molesters and abusers, anyway."

She made it sound like one of Hercules's tougher assignments. I asked her how many Marias could possibly have been killed last spring.

"Last spring? Maria died in 2003."

Five years earlier. My next dumb question involved the crosses themselves. I asked which of the half-dozen actually marked the

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site of Maria's accident.

"None of them. She was killed out on the west side. She was a senior at Ben Davis High School out there. I found her picture in the Ben Davis yearbook." She pointed to the frame on the cross. "That very one. A couple of weeks after her graduation she was T-boned by a drunk driver at the intersection of Girls School Road and Tenth Street.

"I'll save you a drive out there. There's no cross at the intersection. No nothing. And here's something else to chew on. Her family moved away right after she died. They hadn't been in Indy very long when it happened and they decided they didn't like the place. Can't say I blame them.

"I spoke with her father, who's out in Phoenix now. Nice guy. He said he didn't know anything about any memorials. The only person he could think of who might be putting them up is a boyfriend she had at Ben Davis. Mr. Felez couldn't recall the kid's name, but he did remember that he didn't like him. Said he was into gangs."

She paused to let that detail sink in so long it got all the way to my shoes. I asked the question she was obviously waiting for: What did gangs have to do with the crosses?

Gilkey said, "I think these memorials may be some kind of gang sign. See those white flowers? When I first found these things, they all had pink flowers hanging on them. Identical plastic bouquets. Then overnight they all were switched to red flowers. Now they're all suddenly white. Why? Why change plastic flowers at all? I think it's some kind of code. Some of the gangs are into drug smuggling. The different colors may be advertisements for different shipments or a way of letting couriers know it's safe to come in.

"I think Maria's old boyfriend dreamt it up. Maybe he's still sentimental about her or maybe he just had her picture handy. What do you think?"

I thought that Deputy Gilkey needed a break from domestic violence cases so badly she'd created a new assignment for herself out of thin air. But I didn't say that. I asked instead why she had been staking out the Shadeland cross.

"It's the closest one to my apartment. I'm keeping watch on my own time. If I can catch the guy who's changing the flowers, I can find out what this is all about. I thought I'd caught him just now. Instead . . ."

She'd caught a reporter. Now that the impulse to tell her story had been satisfied, she was regretting giving in to it.

"Listen. What I told you just now is off the record. I mean, it's part of an ongoing investigation."

Neither of those claims had much going for it. Before she could invoke attorney-client privilege or the seal of the confessional, I promised her I wouldn't write anything about gangs or drug shipments.

This time I headed downtown and actually made it. At the news-

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paper's offices, I bypassed my desk and went straight to the library—formerly the morgue—where back issues of the *Star Republic* were kept, some on newsprint, some on microfiche, and some on disk. I asked a librarian named Glenda to do a computer search on Maria Felez. After killing two minutes telling me how I could be doing the search myself at my own terminal at my own desk, Glenda typed a few keystrokes and printed off three articles from three different 2003 editions of the paper.

The first described Maria's fatal accident. The second was the girl's very short obituary, which had been supplemented by her yearbook photo. The third article, the one I was really after, reported that the drunk driver who'd killed her, a twenty-five-year-old mechanic named Wallace Ristine, had pled guilty to vehicular homicide and been sentenced to ten years.

What had gotten me thinking of Maria's killer was a discrepancy between Alan Halleck's story and Deputy Gilkey's. The deputy had told me that Maria had been killed five years earlier, but Halleck had been certain that the memorial crosses hadn't appeared until June. Why the five-year gap? If Gilkey was right and the shrines were gang alerts dreamt up by Maria's old boyfriend, the gap wasn't hard to explain. The boyfriend simply hadn't needed the scheme or thought of it until now. But another, likelier explanation was that the designer and builder of the shrines had spent those five years behind bars.

I called a contact in the Indiana Department of Corrections, and he confirmed that Ristine had been released in early June, after his sentence had been halved for good behavior. My informant was more reluctant to share Ristine's current address, but in the end he did. The ex-con had an apartment on Post Road, not far from the first cross Sheila Gilkey had noticed.

I drove out to Post and established that Ristine wasn't at home. Then I had what was either a late lunch or an early dinner. Following that, I settled in to wait.

The man I was after showed up around four. He was overweight and seemed to carry the bulk of the load below his waist, but that impression might have been the work of his outfit: baggy tan coveralls with the logo of a motor oil company displayed on the back. Ristine's red hair was thinning and his skin was very pale. I had the feeling it would have been just as pale no matter where he'd spent the last five years.

He turned when I said his name, and I saw that he was trying to grow the kind of goatee then called a "soul patch." His eyes were very tired, which, like his pallor, may or may not have been a temporary condition.

"What do you want?" he asked.

I wanted an interview. I decided the best way to get one was to jump right in. So I showed him my press card and asked him why he was setting up shrines all over town to the woman he'd killed.

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He blinked twice and then corrected me. "Not all over town. Just on the routes I'm allowed to drive. I'm still on a restricted license. I can only drive to and from my job and to visit my mom and my sister. I work at a truck stop out east on Mount Comfort Road. My mom's in a place just off Shadeland. My sister lives down on Kentucky Avenue."

Otherwise known as State Road 67. That accounted for all the crosses. Ristine had volunteered a lot of information. People often did that when they didn't want to answer the one question put to them. I repeated my unanswered question for the mechanic, just in case he'd forgotten it.

"Why am I doing it?" He passed his tongue over his lips. "Come inside and I'll tell you."

He led me into a second-floor efficiency whose plaid furniture and imitation oil paintings were surely also rented. Spread out on a dinette table were the makings of more Maria shrines: lengths of wood, white paint, frames, vases, sheets of reflective letters. Ristine hurried past the supplies, opened the refrigerator door, and took out a sixteen-ounce bottle of Coke. He drank half of it off, and it seemed to steady him.

"I'm an alcoholic," he said.

I thought he was dodging my question again, but he wasn't.

"Right now, right this minute, I'm dying for a drink. After killing someone and spending five years in prison for it, I still want one. I've tried everything to make it go away, but it never has. I can't go an hour without thinking about it. I can't get into a car without wanting to drive to a bar or a liquor store.

"The only thing that stops me from taking a drink is thinking about Maria, the girl I killed." He drained the bottle and hurriedly added, "What I'm saying is, I never want to hurt anybody again.

"Thinking about Maria—about how I took an innocent life—helps me, but it got so it wasn't enough. One day I noticed this wreath of flowers somebody had set up by the side of the road, and I thought, Maria should have one of those. Next thing I knew, I was making one. And then another and another. I put them up on my normal routes, at spots where I caught myself thinking about a beer. I look up now and I see the white cross and her picture and I don't want the drink.

"That's the whole sick story. I'm sorry if you were looking for something more, but that's the big secret. Just a lousy drunk trying to stay dry."

Not a religious protester or a mad stalker or a gang leader with a penchant for floral codes. All those stories had been wrong. But I decided, watching Ristine try to suck more cola from his empty bottle, that his story was wrong, too. Or at least incomplete.

For one thing, it didn't explain the characteristic of the shrines that had so fascinated Deputy Gilkey. I asked Ristine why, if the shrines were just reminders not to drink, he changed the artificial flowers so regularly. He licked his lips again and said nothing.

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Playing a hunch, I asked him if he'd mind showing me his wallet. He stared at me for a long time, his pale skin looking even more like the shaded side of a fish. Then he took out the wallet, opened it up, and handed it over.

He'd opened it to display a clear plastic sleeve intended to protect a photograph. Behind the plastic was Maria Felez's yearbook photo, cut from the pages of the *Star Republic.* I'd encountered the portrait over and over again, but this was by far the clearest print I'd seen. She really had been a beautiful girl, bursting with the hope and happiness that made most people her age attractive. But there was something more to her beauty than just youth and a nice smile. It was the promise in those dark eyes of a person as beautiful as the face.

"I cut that out of the paper," Ristine said. "I don't know why. Should have been the last face I ever wanted to see. When I was inside, I had it on the wall of my cell. The other guys thought she was my girl, and I let them think it. After a while, I started believing it myself. Why not? Her life was over and so was mine. Wasn't like either of us was ever going to have anybody else."

Maria was a woman men fell in love with, Halleck had said. It was certainly true for Wallace Ristine. I handed back his wallet. Then I reminded him that his life wasn't over. And I said that I couldn't believe Maria Felez would want him throwing away all the years he had left.

He was shaking his head before I'd finished. "I'm not throwing anything away. I'm atoning. Who knows? Maria and I may meet again someday. May really meet. I want to be ready. If there's just one chance in a million, I want to be ready." ○

Blog Bytes **(cont. from p. 31)** Edgar and his follow-up crime novels have been equally good. The title of his latest book, scheduled for July, is *Go-Go Girls of the Apocalypse,* which might not be crime-related, though we should never judge a book by its cover or title, right? At any rate, *Victor Gischler's Blogpocalypse* (**http://victorgischler.blogspot.com**) will keep you posted on what the author's doing and present his ruminations on such things as popular culture and beer.

Robert B. Parker writes so many different series, not to mention Westerns and books for young readers, that you'd think he wouldn't have much time for blogging. And maybe he doesn't, since his posts are few and far between. However, if you're a fan (as I am), you'll want to check out his blog (**http://robertbparker.typepad.com/robertbparker**) occasionally just to find out what he's up to.

Mark Coggins' current novel is *Runoff,* which is just about perfect for the election season. His blog, *Riordan's Desk* (**http://riordansdesk.blogspot.com**), isn't political, however. It has a lot of photos, including those of San Francisco locations used in *Runoff,* and it has links to his discussion of *The New Black Mask,* which should be of interest to readers of this publication. The links lead to *The Rap Sheet* (**http://therapsheet.blogspot.com**), a blog mentioned here previously and one that's always worth a visit. ○

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BLACK MASK

THE BLONDE TIGRESS

by Max Allan Collins

When we asked Max Allan Collins to write something for the return of Black Mask we left the period—contemporary or historical—up to him. It was no surprise, however, when this story, set in *Black Mask*'s heyday, arrived. For its author is the inventor of the "historical P.I." tale, in which a real crime is unwound by a fictional P.I., and this story's P.I., Nate Heller, is perhaps his most popular character. Mr. Collins's latest books are the *CSI* tie-ins: *Serial* and *Bad Rap*.

August 1933 in Chicago was surprisingly cool, unless you were a crook, in which case it was hotter than usual. We were suffering through one of those anti-crime drives the city subjected itself to now and then, and since the Capone/Nitti Outfit got a free pass on its fun and games, small fry like the Blonde Tigress and her "mob" (two male accomplices) got the brunt.

Did the Blonde Tigress have a damn thing to do with the policeman who got himself shot in a Cook County courtroom? No. She and her gang of two merely got caught up in the overreaction when the Honorable John Prystalski, the county's chief judge, ordered all the other judges back from summer vacation to work through the jammed-up docket. Two hundred thirty-five defendants got the book thrown at them that August, including three death sentences.

And that was *before* the Blonde Tigress had appeared in the dock. . . .

In my big underfurnished one-room office on Van Buren, I sat at my desk, working on a pile of retail-credit checks, with the window open behind me to let in a cool morning breeze and the occasional rumble of the El.

I tried to let the phone ring five times before answering, but was short enough on clients to settle for three.

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"A-1 Detective Agency," I said. "Nathan Heller speaking."

"Nate, Sam Backus."

My hopes sank. Backus—small, nervous, with ferret features—was with the public defender's office, which made him the kind of criminal attorney who couldn't afford my help.

"Hiya, Sam. Any of your clients get a ticket for the hot squat today?"

"No, but the day's young. Listen, I got the Tigress."

I sat up. "What?"

"You heard me. Eleanor Jarman is my client."

All summer, the Blonde Tigress case had been plastered across the front pages, and the radio was all over it, too. The so-called Blonde Tigress—a good-looking lady bandit with "tawny hair" and a "voluptuous figure"—had led her two-man mob on a series of stickups all around the West and Northwest sides. The Tigress was said to carry a big revolver in her purse and a blackjack, too, one of her male accomplices using the gun, the Tigress adept with the jack. The usual target was the small merchant—grocery stores and other shops—the robbery victims often roughed up for intimidation or maybe just the hell of it.

After the August 4 holdup of a clothing shop near Oak Park—and the murder of its seventy-year-old proprietor—sometime waitress Eleanor Jarman, her live-in guy George Dale, and Dale's ex-fighter buddy Leo Minneci had been identified as the perpetrators and brought in by two top Detective Bureau dicks.

"Well, she's guilty as sin, isn't she?" I asked him cheerfully. "Maybe you can arrange for her to sit on her boyfriend's lap when they fry him, and save the state on its electricity bill."

"Nate, I think she's being railroaded. These characters Dale and Minneci are stickup guys, sure, and there's no doubt Dale pulled the trigger on the old boy. But Eleanor's just the girlfriend. Wrong place at the wrong time."

"Are they being tried separately?"

"No, but each has separate representation from the public defender's office."

I was shaking my head. "If she's innocent in this, why was she charged? Didn't Tuohy and Glass make the arrest? They're as close to real detectives as the police department gets."

"Nate, you know about this cleanup-and-crackdown campaign that's going on. When did you ever hear of somebody getting arrested for murder in this town and then have the trial go on the same damn month?"

"Okay, you stumped me. But I—"

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"Think it through, Nate. This is about the papers looking for a hot story, and what's better than a sexy baby leading her 'gang' on a bunch of robberies?"

I shifted in my chair. "Listen, I don't care if she's guilty or not guilty. I'd be glad to work for you, Sam, if you were a real criminal lawyer with some scratch to spend."

"That's the good part about all this press nonsense, Nate. Think about the publicity! There's no bigger story right now."

"Then I'm right—there *isn't* any money in this."

"Actually, pal, there is."

That got my attention, but I said, "Don't call me 'pal.' Makes me nervous. When do I ever see you, Sam, when we aren't in a courtroom?"

"Nate, if you take this case, you can peddle your story to one of the papers afterwards, with my blessing. And I've got a true-detective magazine that'll pay even better. That'll beat any of your five-dollar-a-day action, any time."

"That's ten and expenses, and what do you have in mind?"

"Just meet with my client. See if she doesn't deserve the benefit of the doubt."

"So then you have no case?"

". . . I have no case. I need you to go get me one."

If I was the private eye who cleared the Blonde Tigress, I'd be in demand with every criminal lawyer in town.

"I can meet with her," I said, "any time today."

Now a guy can get some pretty funny thoughts sometimes. And by funny, I mean stupid. But while I'd been around, I was only twenty-eight and I couldn't keep from wondering if some exotic, erotic encounter might not occur between the Blonde Tigress and me, behind the closed door of that First District Station interrogation room. The matron standing guard would hear the muffled sounds and wonder what might be happening in there, between the curvaceous blonde gun moll and that handsome six-footer with the reddish brown hair, and dare she interrupt?

I was expecting the combination Jean Harlow and Mata Hari that the papers had been pumping, and in my defense I must say that they'd taken some fairly fetching photos of Eleanor Jarman. And the woman seated at the scarred table in a brick-walled enclosure whose windows were barred and throwing appropriately moody shadows was certainly attractive, albeit in a quiet, modest, even mousy way.

Her hair was not tawny, at least not by my standards—more a dishwater blonde, curling-ironed locks framing her heart-shaped face. I'd call her pretty, or anyway pretty enough, with big gray eyes that dominated her face and a nice mouth, full lips lightly rouged. Prisoners awaiting trial were allowed street clothes—in

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this case, a simple white dress with angular blue stripes and a white collar with a bow, the stripes giving the faintest unintentional prison-uniform touch. She had a nice shape, but "voluptuous" was torturing a point.

She gave me a big smile and stood and held her hand out for me to shake. The smile was disarming—I might have been a brother she hadn't seen for some time.

"Thank you for this, Mr. Heller," she said warmly, as I took a chair at the table, her at the end, me alongside.

"I haven't agreed to take the job, Mrs. Jarman," I said, and took my hat off and tossed it on the table. "I said I'd have a talk with you and see."

Her smile remained, but she put the teeth away and nodded. "It's because Mr. Backus can't afford to hire you. But what if I could?"

"Could what?"

"Afford to hire you."

I squinted at her. "How could you afford to hire a private detective if you can't afford your own lawyer?"

She shrugged and half a smile lingered. "That was strategy, Mr. Heller. I could've hired a lawyer, not an expensive one, but I do have some money salted away. It's just, well . . ."

And I got it.

"If you could hire a criminal attorney," I said, "it would make you look more like a criminal. Somebody pulling off heists all summer could afford counsel. Smart."

"I'm not rich. But I could offer you one hundred dollars."

"I charge ten a day and expenses. That'll take you a fair way."

"Fine. I'll have it sent over to your office."

"You're not what I expected."

She grinned. "Not a Tigress?"

"Not the femme fatale the papers paint, and not the victim Sam Backus would make you, either."

"What, then?"

"A smart, resourceful cookie."

"Thanks. Could I call you something besides 'Mr. Heller'?"

"Sure. Nate'll do. And I'll call you Eleanor."

They had provided a pitcher of ice water and I served us up some. The breezy afternoon was making its way through windows that were open onto their bars.

"Do you need to hear my story, Nate, before you say yes?"

"I want to hear your story, but I already said yes to your hundred dollars."

She had a whole repertoire of smiles, and she gave me another one, a chin-crinkler. But the gray eyes had a sadness that fit neither her happy kisser nor her businesslike brain.

She started with the story of her life, which didn't take long,

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because it wasn't much of one. She was from Sioux City, Iowa, daughter of immigrant German parents who died in a flu epidemic when she was fourteen, just the right age to start working as a waitress in a joint near the stockyards. She married Leroy Jarman, who told her she deserved better, and gave her two sons and put her to work as a laundress. Earlier this year, after Jarman took a powder, she moved to Chicago, where she continued to do laundry in her little apartment while taking care of her two boys. A neighbor introduced her to George Dale, and her life changed.

"George never said what he did for a living," she told me. "I always figured it was something a little shady, but hell, I ran a beer flat in Sioux City, so who was I to talk? Anyway, he always had plenty of dough and we lived in nice apartments."

Then she got to the meat of the matter: the crime. She and her boyfriend George and George's friend Leo were on their way to a Cubs game at Wrigley Field. They were running early and decided to stop and do a little shopping; George spotted the clothing store sign and pulled in, saying he needed some shirts. They had all three gone inside.

"George was talking to Mr. Hoeh up in front," she said. Her eyes were not on me; they seemed to be staring into her memory. "The old man was getting shirts from behind the counter and laying boxes out for George to see. Leo wasn't interested, and was just hanging by the door. I was in the back of the store, looking at ties and other boys' clothing—my sons are nine and eleven—and was caught up in making some selections." Now she looked at me, gray eyes wide and earnest. "Then I heard the sound of a scuffle."

"Was the old boy still behind the counter?"

"No, he was coming around after George, who was heading out."

"Leaving you in back of the store?"

"No, that's the other thing that alerted me that something was wrong—George was calling, 'Eleanor! Hurry!' "

"What did you think was happening?"

"Honestly, I had no idea. I guess I thought the old man had gone off his rocker or something. Leo was there at the door, holding it open, but Mr. Hoeh was attacking George. Then all of sudden George had this gun . . ."

"You didn't know George had a gun?"

She shook her head. "And the old man wrestled with George, had a hold of his wrist and twisted the thing around, and it went off!"

"And the old boy got hit?"

"No! *Leo* did—in his hand, his left hand, I think. Leo yelled something like, 'Jesus, George, you shot me!' Then George shoved Mr. Hoeh away, and I was coming up from the back of the shop now, and I followed them out onto the sidewalk. I was the last one

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out, kind of trailing the old man, who was all over George. Why did he do that? He *knew* George had a gun!"

I shrugged. "It was his store. A guy his age, builds a business, he might do anything to defend it. Go on."

"I know Mr. Hoeh was old, but he was big and tough, slugging and swinging, and I almost jumped on his back, trying to pull him off George, trying to stop this."

"You must've known it was a holdup by now."

She shook her head firmly. "No. I wasn't thinking, not rationally, anyway. It was all so fast. I just knew George was in trouble and this crazy old man was attacking him."

"All right. What happened then?"

She swallowed; no smiles now. "The old man shoved me away. That's when George shot him. Twice."

I drew in a breath; I let it out. "And Mr. Hoeh died before he made it to the hospital."

"I know." She was shaking her head, eyes glued to the scarred tabletop. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea George was some kind of . . . stickup man. But I can't believe he did that, with *me* along."

"You'd never been along before?"

"No. Never."

"They say something like sixty witnesses have identified you and George and Leo in a whole slew of other robberies. Thirty-some?"

"I don't care what they say. These witnesses are only saying what the police tell them to. Do you think they had us stand in the show-up line? No. Hell, no. They'd haul their witnesses into the women's cell block and point at me and say, 'That's her, isn't it? The Tigress?' And I'll bet they've done the same kind of thing with George and Leo."

"That's not a point I'd care to argue. You're not saying that this was a spur-of-the-moment thing for George, that he suddenly decided to become a stickup artist on his way to a Cubs game? He didn't grow that gun."

She got out another smile, a bitter one. "No. I understand that now. I believe George and Leo have been at this a long time. George had been throwing a lot of money around and that's where it came from, obviously. They saw an opportunity with that old man alone in that shop, and they took it—putting me in this fix."

"You're not saying there's another 'Tigress' working with George and Leo?"

"Why not? And anyway, I'm no 'Tigress,' and if there *is* a real female accomplice, she probably isn't either."

I frowned at her. "You think George has another girlfriend who goes out on robberies with him?"

"No. But Leo might."

"Is Leo married?"

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"Yeah. Does that mean he can't have a girlfriend?"

"If it did," I said, and grinned at her, "I'd be out of business."

"It's also possible," she said, "that George and Leo pulled some robberies, but on their own. *Without* a female accomplice, and we're taking the blame for some other bunch."

"You each have your own lawyers."

"Yeah. Our stories don't exactly jibe. Leo says he had no idea George was going to pull a robbery at that haberdashery. George says there wasn't any robbery."

"Then why did George have the gun?"

She held her hands up in surrender. "I think it was the old man's. Look, they don't exactly let me talk to George and Leo. You'll have to ask them, if you can. . . . Well, Nate? Do you think you can help?"

"I'll give it a hundred bucks' worth of college try," I said.

"Do you believe my version of what happened?"

"I don't exactly believe you. But I don't exactly disbelieve you, either. I'll keep an open mind. How's that?"

"That's the best I could hope for," she said, and offered me her hand to shake. The handshake lingered and her gray eyes sent me the tiniest signal that her gratitude might be shown in ways beyond that hundred bucks.

Which is as close as my Tigress daydream came to playing out.

In the hallway of the First District Station, a new, modern facility, I encountered an old-fashioned cop—Captain John Stege, who greeted me much as I'd expect: "What the hell are you doing here, Heller?"

Stege was a fiftyish fireplug with a round white face and round black-rimmed glasses. He was in shirtsleeves and a blue bow tie, which was about as casual as he ever got, a revolver on his hip.

"Fine, Captain," I said. "How are you?"

The owlish cop frowned at me. "Get your ass in my office."

I was an irritant to Stege because I confused him: When I'd been on the Detective Bureau, not so long ago, I'd ratted out some corrupt coppers, which he considered disloyal of me, and yet he was one of the most honest flatfeet on the force.

I sat across his desk from him. The office was as small and clean and compact as he was. He just looked at me, asking no question but clearly expecting an answer.

"I'm doing a job for Sam Backus," I said.

"Since when does the public defender's office have money to hire investigators?"

"Since never." I shrugged. "Maybe I'm doing it out of a sense of public duty."

His tiny eyes tightened behind the lenses. "Hell—not the

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Tigress? That's it, isn't it? You figure you can peddle your story to the papers!"

"I don't care what anybody says. You're a detective."

The door to the office was open. I was sitting there with my hat on. He told me to close the door and take off my hat. I did so. What was this about?

"I'm glad you're on it," Stege said.

"What?"

"Something smells about that case."

"Oh, you mean like taking witnesses down to the cell block and pointing to the suspect, in lieu of a line-up?"

He tasted his mouth and it obviously wasn't a pleasant flavor. "Something like that. This cleanup campaign, I never saw so many corners cut. If I can help you, let me know. I mean, keep it on the q.t.—but let me know."

"This is so sudden, Captain."

"Don't get cute. It's just that lately I feel like we're working for these yellow damn journalists—trying to make ourselves look good instead of trying to do our jobs."

I sat forward. "They're taking this to trial right away. I could use some help."

"All right." Stege squinted at me meaningfully. "But don't ask to see the files—I won't go sneaking around on honest cops. Anyway, the papers told the story accurately enough, if you take out the 'Tigress' hooey."

"Do you think Dale and Minneci were part of this stickup gang hitting small merchants on the West and Northwest Sides?"

"They could be. And so could that woman, for that matter. There's definitely been a rash of robberies where two men and a woman go into a store, once they've established that no other customers are around. They'd make a lot of noise, one of the men and the woman, too, yelling and threatening and even shoving, waving a gun and a blackjack around."

"That's not a stupid approach."

"You don't think sticking up innocent merchants is stupid, Heller?"

"Sure. My old man ran a bookshop on the West Side, remember? Anybody kills a shop owner for what's in his till, I'd like to take their tonsils out with a penknife. But by making a big commotion, intimidating their victim? It can turn the whole thing into a big blur. Hard to get a good identification out of somebody who's been put through that. What was the woman's role?"

Stege shrugged. "Like I said, she was part of the show. Apparently she'd come in with a big handbag and the man would dip into it and that's where the gun came from. She was the one waving the blackjack around, and some victims claimed they'd been struck by it."

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"They'd clean out the cash drawer?"

"Yeah, and sometimes help themselves to some merchandise. This woman, in clothing shops with female apparel, she'd pick herself out some pretty things and take 'em along."

"Women do love to shop."

Stege grimaced; helping me was hard on him. "I don't want you bothering the dicks on this case. They're good boys. I'm afraid all this pressure for arrests and publicity may have got the better of 'em, is all."

"I won't even talk to them," I said. "Who I want to talk to are the Tigress's little cubs—George Dale and Leo Minneci."

The little round-faced copper nodded and reached out his pudgy little fingers for the phone.

Within an hour I was sitting in another interrogation room, smaller but also with brick walls, barred windows, and a scarred table. I might have still been at the First District Station, but I wasn't: This was the Cook County Jail on Dearborn, and a cellblock guard was ushering in the first name on my dance card: George Dale.

Dale was tall, maybe six two, a good-looking guy with an athletic build; he had a certain Lothario look undercut by thinning brown hair. Dale was in a white shirt, open at the collar, and brown suit pants with dark shoes and white socks.

The guard deposited him across the table from me. Dale wasn't in handcuffs or leg irons or anything—just a big guy with a friendly face, unless you knew how to read the coldness of his dark eyes. And I did. I was glad I wasn't packing my nine millimeter, because this character could have made a reasonable go of taking it off me.

"What's the idea?" Dale asked. "Where's my lawyer? If I'm talking to another copper, I want my lawyer."

"My name's Heller, private operative. Working for your sweetheart's attorney."

He sat forward, some life coming into the hard eyes. "How is Eleanor? Is she doing all right?"

"She's sweating the hot seat like you are. I think I can help get her out of this, if you can confirm she wasn't an accomplice."

"She's innocent as a newborn baby!"

"Well, let's not get carried away, George. . . ."

"Look, Heller, I'm no stickup man. I'm a gambler. I make my money on dice and poker, you ask around. This is all just a terrible misunderstanding. An accident."

"An accident."

"Yeah. That old man was crazy! I wanted to buy some shirts, and I wanted 'em in quantity—said I'd buy half a dozen if he'd give me a decent discount. He said his price was firm and I tried to haggle

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and he just shook his head and gave me a nasty look. I had this box of shirts in my hands, and he yanked it away, and I yanked back, and he shoved me, and I shoved him back."

"Across the counter, this is?"

"Yeah!"

"He was seventy, wasn't he?"

"So they say, but he was a wild man! After I shoved him, he pulled the gun out from under the counter and came around and chased me, waving the thing. It was, you know, close quarters, and I tried to grab it away from him, and it went off and shot Leo through the hand. Then we ran out onto the street—Eleanor was in the back of the store and came running up behind us. The old fellow and me, we were struggling over the gun, and Eleanor was pounding him on the back, and he kind of tossed her off, just like you'd toss off a kid that jumped you. Then the gun just . . . went off."

"Just went off. Twice."

"Well . . . yeah. I was scared. He was vicious."

"Okay, George. Maybe we should start over."

He shook his head. "Look, I didn't pull any stickup. They found fourteen bucks in the cash drawer, you know."

"Right. But you had a roll of bills in your pocket adding up to three hundred bucks."

"That was *my* money! I don't deny I shot the old man. But it was an accidental type thing."

"George. Don't kid a kidder—you're a seasoned stickup artist, and you stopped at that clothing store for a smash and grab."

He just sat there, the eyes going hard again. "I don't say I'm a saint. But Eleanor was never in on anything illegal I ever done, and these witnesses that say we were some kind of gang, the three of us, it's a goddamn lie. The cops are just looking to clear a bunch of robberies off their books, in one fell swoop."

"The three of us, you said. Where does Minneci figure in?"

"He was just along for the ride. I'm sorry he got his hand shot up."

"Going to the Cubs game."

"Right."

I didn't press. The story held water like a paper sack, but it was close enough to Eleanor's to make them both look credible. Of course, they'd known for several days that the cops were after them and had had time to get their stories straight before getting hauled in.

Leo Minneci was a dark, handsome guy, or anyway, handsome if you didn't mind the cauliflower ears and the flattened nose. I'd never met him before, but I remembered him from his pug days—he'd been a pretty fair heavyweight, going up against Tuffy Griffiths and other headliners.

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He wore a blue workshirt, sleeves rolled up, and blue jeans, with his left hand bandaged. He had a confused expression, like a stranger had called to him from across the street.

Seated opposite me, he asked, "What's this about? You another cop?"

"I'm a private dick working for Eleanor Jarman's attorney. I'd like to get your version of what happened at that clothing shop."

He shrugged. "Listen, I'm one of them victims of circumstance you hear about."

"Really. I always wanted to meet one of those."

"This has nothing to do with me. It's Dale and that dame of his. I was just riding with them to a ballgame. We was running a little early, and Dale said he could use a shirt and we stopped at that place. We were only in there a coupla minutes before Dale pulled a gun and stuck up the old guy. I tried to keep George from shooting the geezer and I, you know, wrestled with him, and the thing went off and . . ." He raised his bandaged mitt. ". . . I got a bullet through the hand."

"Did Eleanor know anything about the stickup?"

He shook his head. "I think it was, what you call it, spur of the moment on George's part. Look, I got a wife and two kids. I do all right with day labor, and I wouldn't risk putting them in a bad spot."

"What's your wife's name?"

"Why?"

"I'm just gathering information, Leo. Don't get jumpy."

"It's Tina. You want the address?"

I wrote that down.

I left the jail feeling better about my client. George Dale might or might not be a stickup artist, and Leo Minneci might or might not be his accomplice; but their stories both put Eleanor Jarman on the sidelines.

I talked to half a dozen of the merchants on the witness list. Advertising that I was working for the Tigress would have turned them into clams, so I would just tell them I was a detective, and flash my little private investigator's badge, and that'd do the trick.

Mrs. Swan G. Swanson (no joke) was typical. She was the proprietor of a little gift shop across from the clothing store on West Division Street. This was a busy shopping area, the treetops of fashionable, sleepy Oak Park visible above the bustle of commerce and traffic on this late afternoon.

She was about sixty-five, five foot five in heels and maybe one hundred and sixty pounds that still had some shape to them, well served by a cotton dress with white polka dots on dark blue; with that pretty face highlighted by nice light blue eyes behind round

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wire-framed glasses, she was who you hoped your wife would turn out to be at that age.

"Detective Heller," she said, in a whispery soprano, "it was one of the most vicious things I ever saw."

"I know you've been over this several times, but I'm new on the case. Don't spare the details."

She nodded. "Two men came running out of the store. The first man was dark and he was holding on to his hand, which was bleeding, dripping all over the sidewalk. The other man was struggling with Mr. Hoeh, who ran after them. Mr. Hoeh was very brave, fighting hand to hand with a man holding a gun."

Very brave or very dumb.

"Then this wildcat of a woman, a blonde, came out and was swinging this blackjack around and was hitting Mr. Hoeh with it. Mr. Hoeh sort of stumbled and stopped fighting and the woman stepped to one side and the man with the gun shot Mr. Hoeh—twice! And then when Mr. Hoeh was on the sidewalk, bleeding, dying, that vixen kicked him! Kicked him right in the face!"

"That is vicious. Tell me, when did you notice the blackjack?"

"Oh, uh . . . well, right away, I guess. When she started swinging it."

"I was just wondering if the detectives you spoke to earlier had mentioned that the Tigress sometimes used a blackjack. Did you notice the blackjack at the time? Or when they mentioned this to you, did you remember you'd seen it?"

She frowned. "Actually, I guess I just thought she was pounding on him. But on reflection, I was sure, pretty sure, she had a blackjack."

"What does a blackjack look like, anyway?"

The light blue eyes froze behind the lenses. "Uh . . . well, it's black, obviously. It's a sort of wrench, isn't it?"

When I grew tired of talking to these witnesses who'd been played like a kazoo by the Detective Bureau, I had a Coke and a grilled cheese at the drugstore on the corner of Austin Boulevard and Division. Then I called the First District Station to see if that dedicated little public servant Captain Stege was still in his office.

He was, and I asked, "Was there anything in the reports about Hoeh having any facial injuries?"

"Just minor stuff, from the scuffle with Dale, I understand."

"Then nobody kicked him in the face?"

He grunted a laugh. "I saw that in the papers, some of the witnesses saying that. But no, Heller, nobody kicked the old man. The two bullets were enough."

"Usually are. I read something about a cache of weapons being collected at the apartment where the dicks caught up with Dale and Eleanor. Was there a blackjack among the stuff?"

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"No. Pretty good arsenal, though—four revolvers and a shotgun."

Dale had said he was no saint.

I went back to the office, not because I was as dedicated as Captain Stege, but owing to the fact that I lived there, with the Murphy bed to prove it. There was a Depression going on, as you may have heard, and I had an arrangement with the building's owner to keep an eye on things at night in exchange for rent. That evening I needed to get over to the Century of Progress, where I was doing some security work—without the World's Fair, my summer would have been a bust—and I was just getting ready to go when a knock rattled the pebbled glass of my door.

"Come in," I said, wondering what I'd done to deserve two clients in one day, but it wasn't that at all. For a moment I thought Leo Minneci had escaped and come around, because this was a dark young man who resembled Minneci strongly. On a closer inspection, he was smaller and younger than Leo, without the flattened nose, and better dressed—white, short-sleeved shirt, red tie, white summer slacks, and white bluchers—also a boater-style straw hat, which was in his right hand.

"I'm Tony Minneci," he said. "Leo's brother. I have something for you, Mr. Heller."

I gestured to the client's chair and he came over and filled it.

"This may seem a little strange," he said. "I'm not here because of my brother."

"Oh?"

"I'm kind of mad at Leo. He got me in trouble."

Then I remembered—the car used in the robbery, whose license number had been reported by three or four witnesses, turned out to belong to Tony here, a University of Illinois student working as a grocery clerk for a summer job.

"Leo asked to borrow my car that day," his young doppelgänger said, "but I said no. Then he took it anyway."

"Did you know Leo was doing stickups? Is that why you didn't want him using your wheels?"

He shook his head. "I didn't know anything about that. It's just my car, is all. Let him get his own car."

He got into his pocket and fished out some bills—twenties. He put five of them on my desk. That was a lot of cabbage for a college-kid grocery clerk to haul around. A well-dressed college-kid grocery clerk.

He smiled shyly.

"That's to cover what you're doing for Eleanor."

"You're Leo's brother, but you're running an errand for Eleanor? Why?"

"She's a nice girl. She's innocent in all this. We were friendly."

"You and Eleanor?"

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"No, all of us, Eleanor and George and Leo."

"This is the same Leo? Let-him-get-his-own-car Leo?"

He shrugged. "I get along fine with my brother. We don't agree on everything under the sun, but—"

"What don't you agree with? Him sticking up stores?"

"Look, Mr. Heller, my brother may not be perfect, but he does his best to keep that wife of his happy. If he did do something he shouldn't have, you can blame her for it."

"Why?"

"Because she's a nag, that's why. You should go talk to her. See for yourself. If you ask me . . . nothing."

"Make your point, Tony."

"They got two kids now, Mr. Heller, but she was a wild one, Tina. She got my brother in all kinds of scrapes, and then she trapped him, far as I'm concerned."

"How?"

"Back when he was boxing and making good money, she got pregnant on purpose to bag him. If I was on this case? I'd see what her alibi was, the day of that robbery, and all those other robberies."

"Does your sister-in-law know you feel this way?"

"No." He shrugged again. "I'm nice to her. Leo asked me to keep an eye on her, and the two kiddies, make sure they're okay. I'm on my way there now, as it happens."

"Really?"

"Yeah, she's broke. I'm gonna give her some grocery money."

"You are a nice guy, Tony. Why don't we go over there together?"

He frowned. "Why would you want to do that?"

"She's on my list to talk to. Maybe you could pave the way for me a little."

"Well . . . okay. I don't see why not. You'll see I don't let it show how I feel—my only interest is those two little kids. My nephews."

"Sure. You have a car?"

"Yeah." He got to his feet and put the straw hat on. "You want a ride, Mr. Heller?"

"No, I have the address. I'll meet you over there."

The Minneci apartment was four handsomely furnished rooms over a florist shop on the corner of Madison and Homan. These were fairly nice digs, suggesting hubby Leo had been doing all right for his little family before the cops took him away.

Tony Minneci introduced me as a private detective trying to help clear Leo. Tina Minneci—tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed, slender—immediately warmed to me, and seemed genuinely bewildered that anyone could ever think her gentle, loving husband could have robbed or hurt anybody. (It would have been impolite to point out that gentle, loving Leo used to bash other guys' brains

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out for a living.) She wore about a buck's worth of cotton housedress, blue plaid with a ruffled collar, nicely feminine, and her narrow face would have been pretty with a little makeup and a good night's sleep.

She sat us down at a round wooden table in the kitchen; a highchair was shoved to one side. She had a pot of coffee going as well as a bottle of milk in a saucepan on the stove.

We all had coffee while we sat and talked—quietly, because she had just put baby Jimmy down for the night.

"He's a good boy," she said, almost whispering, "unless something wakes him—then look out!"

I said, "You have another child, don't you?"

"Yes—Leo Junior. He's six. He's been with his grandparents since . . . since Leo Senior, went away. They have a nice flat on the West Side—Daddy has a little restaurant over there, and does pretty well."

"I see."

"Little Jimmy and I may be joining Leo Junior. I may have to move back in with my folks—my rent here is due in a week and I'm flat broke."

I nodded toward the living room. "You have a pretty nice place here. This isn't exactly a Hooverville."

"I know, but we don't have any money stashed away in the bank or under a pillow, either. Leo's always been a good provider. He made a really decent living as a fighter, and when that dwindled, he always brought enough in to keep us comfortable."

"Where did he work?"

"No one place, but he always had something going. He did day labor, sometimes he helped out at the gym where he used to train."

I kept my tone easy. "You don't think that money could've come from . . . somewhere else?"

Her eyes flared. "Mr. Heller, my husband is an honest man. He got in with a bad crowd, is all. I always thought George Dale was a slickster."

"What about Eleanor Jarman?"

Mrs. Minneci gave up a benefit-of-the-doubt shrug. "She always seemed all right. She has two little ones of her own to look after, you know."

Tony sat forward; his straw boater was on the table next to his coffee cup like an upturned soup bowl. "Listen, I got some grocery money for you, Tina. Five bucks I squeezed out of my clerk job. If I go over there with you, I can get the employee discount."

Mrs. Minneci turned her dark eyes on me and explained: "The little grocery store where Tony works part-time is just a block from here. . . . You're a sweetheart, Tony, but I can't leave the baby here alone, and I'm not about to wake him."

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"I can babysit," I said, "if you're not gone too long."

She beamed at me, then frowned with parental concern. "What would a nice young man like you know about taking care of a baby?"

"This nice young man used to go out with a nice divorcée with three kids, two in diapers. I know all about changing 'em, and I wield a mean milk bottle, too."

Mrs. Minneci glanced at her brother-in-law, who shrugged and said, "Mr. Heller's reliable. No worries. We can be over there and back in fifteen, twenty minutes."

A small discussion ("Do you mind? Are you sure?") followed, but finally dutiful Tony took the sister-in-law he claimed to despise—although I'd seen no sign of that—out the door and into the hall and down the stairs.

The tricky part was that slumbering kid. Jimmy was in a crib in the bedroom where I needed to poke around. So I did my quietest, most careful work, and I'd like to say I was able to pull off the find because I was a real professional, but a blind man could have pawed around and come up with the stuff.

Under the bed, in a trio of clothing boxes, were lovely fashions, long-sleeved wool and rabbit's-hair numbers, stylish with Ascot ties and metal buttons and all the most fashionable current touches. Stege had said the Blonde Tigress had helped herself to pretty things on the robberies, and these brand-new, never-worn dresses certainly qualified.

Most damning were two items dropped on top of the final box I opened, nestled on a long-sleeved rayon satin two-color frock with a bow at the neck: a blonde wig and a blackjack.

Some things never go out of style.

I thought about laying all this stuff out on the kitchen table, like a meal; but instead I just put the kaboodle away and went out and helped myself to another cup of coffee. Something about the setup made me think maybe I should have taken that bottle of warm milk out of that pan instead.

They returned in just over twenty minutes, with their arms full of grocery sacks and Tina Minneci all smiles. She was saying, "I think I'll have the folks send Leo Junior, home for a few days. We can eat like a proper family again. How can I thank you, Tony?"

Tony was all smiles, too, but his eyes kept flicking toward me expectantly. I pitched in with my hostess and her brother-in-law and helped unload the grocery sacks and turn the cupboard shelves from empty to full.

Leaning back against the kitchen counter, looking happy and with a hint of how lovely she really could be, Tina Minneci said, "Any trouble with Jimmy?"

"No," I said. "Slept like a baby."

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That made her laugh. "Shall we sit down, and I'll try to answer the rest of your questions?"

"I don't have any more questions, thanks. You've been very gracious, Mrs. Minneci. Tony, isn't it time we were going?"

Tony nodded and we made our goodbyes and started down the steps. I waited until we were two-thirds of the way before I tripped him and sent him rattling down those stairs in a pile of arms and legs until he knocked up against the closed door.

I stood over him in the little entryway and he gazed up at me, astounded. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"That's the clumsiest frame I ever saw."

He got to his feet, brushing off his white pants. He picked up his boater, which had cracked. "You busted my hat!"

"I should bust more."

His chin stuck out at me. "Listen, my brother is a boxer. He's taught me a thing or two. I can take a punch."

"Can you take a slap?" I asked, and slapped him four times, twice per cheek, the sound ringing like gunshots in the stairwell.

Then I grabbed him by the shirt front and slammed him into some little wall-mounted mailboxes, which probably hurt some. He was crying.

"I've seen low," I said. "But framing your own sister-in-law . . . Did Eleanor put you up to it?"

"I'm not talking to you!"

"Question is, am I talking to the cops?"

"You work for us!"

"Shut up." I shook my head. "Get the hell out of here. You make me sick."

He and his busted boater scooted out. Under normal circumstances, he might have been able to give me worse than I'd just dished out to him. But I had righteous indignation on my side, which I admit was something new.

The next morning, Eleanor Jarman and I sat in the same interrogation room as before. Her arms were folded, her eyes cold, her mouth a wide, tight line, straight as a ruler's edge.

My arms were folded, too, but I was smiling. "Here's the deal. I keep the hundred. I intend to send thirty bucks of it to Minneci's wife, to help out on her rent. But I keep the rest—you're getting off cheap, because if I sold what I know to the papers, you'd really be sunk."

I had just filled her in on a bunch of stuff, including that I knew Leo's brother was part of their little gang, possibly fencing boodle, certainly providing the car.

She gave me a gray-eyed glare. "I ask my lawyer for the shiftiest private eye around, and *you're* what he comes up with? A goody twoshoes?"

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"This isn't about right or wrong. This is about me not being stupid. Scratch that—it's about me not liking being taken for stupid. You and George and Leo have been knocking over little shops since, when? April, May?"

She just shrugged.

"The clothes I found under Mrs. Minneci's bed were strictly fall and winter items."

Her eyebrows went up. "If I wanted to frame her, and had a bunch of stolen summer frocks of my own, why didn't I just have that dope Tony stick some of *those* under that bitch's bed?"

"Because you girls don't wear the same size. She's tall and skinny, you're short and curvy. You had to frame her with clothing that would fit her—and that dope Tony, as you accurately put it, went out and bought new things . . . fall and winter items that just hit the stores."

"You said you found a blonde wig and a blackjack."

"Yeah. The wig was new, but the blackjack wasn't. You really did go around terrorizing small merchants with that thing, didn't you?"

She sighed and her face softened. She unfolded her arms and put her hands on the scarred table and leaned forward. "Listen, Heller—dumbbell Tina wouldn't've served any time. That was just to muddy the waters and help get me off—when the cops looked into it, she'd probably have alibis for some of those robberies, maybe including the Hoeh thing."

"Probably. Maybe."

"And as for waving around that blackjack? That was just theater. I never slugged anybody, I never kicked anybody. These are hard times, as you may have noticed, and these hands . . ." She held them up; they were cracked and almost arthritic-looking, fifty-year-old hands on a woman not thirty. ". . . these hands had done all the laundry they could take."

"But the cops wanted to make themselves look good, and the papers went along, turning you into a Tigress."

She smiled. "Hey, fella, I *was* a tigress, but that was part of the show. Scare 'em, rattle 'em, and get them to give up their money. And we lived pretty darn good these last few months."

"Until Gustav Hoeh didn't cooperate."

Her smile faded. "I hate that. You can believe me or not believe me, I don't give a damn. But the truth is, I never wanted anybody hurt. This was just about some fast, easy cash."

"That gun you hauled around in your bag for George—you never thought he'd use it?"

"No. He's a coward at heart."

"Hell, Eleanor. Don't you know? That's who *uses* guns."

Some of the details I never got. I was only on the case for two days, so I never found out exactly what hold Eleanor Jarman had

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over Tony Minneci, and I have no idea what became of Tina and her two boys after I sent the thirty-bucks rent money.

On the witness stand, Eleanor wore a pretty blue frock (where had she picked that up, I wondered?) and told her sad tale of being an orphan and waiting tables and doing laundry. She denied knowing that Hoeh's store was going to be robbed, while Dale had changed his story to put the blame on Minneci, who told a similar story with Dale cast as the heavy. Assistant State's Attorney Crowley went after the death sentence for all three, but only George Dale got the chair; his last act, in April of 1934, was to write Eleanor a love letter.

As for Eleanor, she and Leo each got 199 years, a sentence designed to beat any reasonable chance of parole—and the longest stretch ever assigned a woman in Illinois.

That should be the end of the story, but the Blonde Tigress had other ideas. For seven years Eleanor served her time at Joliet as (to quote the warden) "an industrious, obedient, and model prisoner in every respect." Then, on the morning of August 8, 1940, she wore a guard's dress stolen from a locker and used a rope fashioned from sheets to go over the ten-foot wall.

Supposedly she had heard her youngest son had threatened to run away from home. The story goes that Eleanor Jarman returned to Sioux City, spent some time with her two boys, and then disappeared, not turning up till she met with family members briefly in 1975 before vanishing again.

No one, except perhaps her blood relatives, knows how Eleanor spent the rest of her life or where. My take on it was that she was neither the Tigress of the press nor the victim she pretended to be. And maybe seven years was enough time for her to serve, though numerous attempts by her family to get her pardoned went nowhere.

Anyway, the part I liked best was how she got out of prison.

By stealing a dress. ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction based on an actual murder, and many real names are used; Nathan Heller is a fictional character, however, and "Tony Minneci" is a composite of Leo Minneci's real brother and several other peripheral figures in the case, none of whom were shown to have anything to do with the robberies or murder. I wish to acknowledge the help of my longtime research associate George Hagenauer, who wrote about the Blonde Tigress in *The Big Book of Little Criminals* (1996). Newspaper accounts, including retrospective ones, were consulted as well as several articles in vintage "true detective" magazines, notably "Smashing the Terror Reign of Chicago's Blonde Gun Girl" by Robert Faherty in *Detective Tabloid,* February 1935. Mark Gribben's internet article, "Eleanor Jarman Please Phone Home," was also useful.

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Clay Pillows

by James Powell

> "... the stories of Toronto-born [James] Powell ... might be likened to the tales of Saki or John Collier. Powell's carefully worked prose displays not only these masters' mixture of horror and humour, in which a surprise ending is often illuminated by a flash of surreal fantasy, but also a Hitchcockian relish for the tongue-in-cheek laced with venom." *Books in Canada.*

The tiny church had four lancet windows and a crowded stations-of-the-cross. At the end of the funeral mass the priest left the altar to shake the smoking censer and holy water over Uncle Clarence's coffin. Then he disappeared into the sacristy through a lancet-shaped doorway.

Tom O'Malley, a balding, tired-faced man in his sixties, knelt to say a final prayer for his uncle and found himself saying another for Mr. Gregory, the man O'Malley had shot and killed so many years before. Had all the church ceremony brought Mr. Gregory and his bare-bones burial to mind? Uncle Clarence said he'd dug a hole in the ground in the woods behind the farmhouse and tumbled the body in. He would never show O'Malley where. "Don't dwell on it, Tommy. Self-defense, cut and dried."

The farm was on the edge of town. O'Malley had recognized the man limping quickly up the dirt road from his uncle's description. When Mr. Gregory came bursting through the door waving a revolver, O'Malley, who'd never held a firearm before in all his eighteen years, had found the pistol and was holding it out at arm's length using both hands to keep it steady. The intruder fired first. O'Malley shot back. Mr. Gregory clutched his chest and fell to the floor with blood spilling from his mouth.

In the next moment Uncle Clarence was standing in the doorway, breathing hard. He knelt down by the body. "Dead," he said, shaking his head. "I saw him get off the bus. He didn't see me. Don't know how he found us. But he set off this way like a man who knew where he was going. I followed close as I could."

Astonished by what he'd done, O'Malley stood frozen to the spot.

"I'll take it from here, Tommy," said Uncle Clarence, grabbing the body under the armpits and dragging it toward the door. Seeing the smear of blood on the linoleum, O'Malley went to be sick.

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O'Malley sat back, alone in the front pew reserved for family. Mike, his older brother by a year, wasn't there. Nor were any of his sisters, though Uncle Clarence had provided for them all and taken care of their mother, his older and favorite sister, until she died ten years ago.

He turned in the pew. Beyond the opened doors of the church the undertaker's men were butting their cigarettes before coming inside to deal with the coffin. Now O'Malley examined the mourners. Half a van-load had come from St. Mary's Village, the retirement home where his uncle had lived since his recent stroke. The others were a few of Victory Public Relations' older clients.

In 1944, with the end of the war in sight, many Toronto businesses starting up were calling themselves Victory this or Victory that. As a young boy O'Malley didn't know what public relations was. But he suspected it had to do with the shady side of the street where his father did his walking.

O'Malley followed the coffin out into the bright June day. The warm breeze promised summer, but still carried a chill edge to it. The retirement-home people couldn't go to the gravesite because their van had been scheduled for a trip to the shopping mall in Humber. But the other mourners got in their cars and fell in behind the hearse and limousine as the funeral procession set off at the measured pace of rented solemnity, passing through the old part of town where roots of the large trees shouldered the sidewalk pavement about and English daisies spotted the lawns.

O'Malley rode in the limousine with the priest, now in white surplice and black stole, who mentioned visiting the deceased at St. Mary's and how he found him a kindred spirit. O'Malley gave the man a long glance before remembering his mother had said that after getting out of the army Uncle Clarence had given serious thought to going into the seminary. The priest went on to describe the stained-glass half-window the deceased had willed the church, a pelican feeding its young with its own blood, which would go between the last two stations of the cross.

O'Malley's mind was elsewhere. He was remembering his great surprise when Uncle Clarence stepped in "to hold the fort," as he put it, after O'Malley's father's second heart attack. There was nothing shady-side-of-the-street about his uncle. The man's upright air was helped along by the tailored three-piece navy-blue suit and gray fedora he'd bought with his army gratuity money. In fact, his decision to stay on after O'Malley's father got back on his feet made young O'Malley wonder if he'd been wrong about the family business.

After O'Malley Senior died Uncle Clarence took over, closed down the office, and moved Victory Public Relations out of town. But he visited them every month, coming after nightfall. Answer the door and there he'd be with a prepared smile. He and O'Malley's mother would sit at the table in the dining alcove and he would go over the bills and

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write out the checks. Then they would talk in low voices for a while. On his way out Uncle Clarence always stopped to speak to O'Malley's brother Mike who, it was understood, would go into the family business when he got out of high school. Then Uncle Clarence would give the rest of them a quick look as if making sure they were all there.

The cemetery was out past the fairgrounds. The slow drive through the countryside reminded O'Malley of the morning train out of Union Station, which they took each August to Duck Lake, one of the Muskoka region's archipelago of lakes. When they got off the train Uncle Clarence would be there to drive them to a rented cottage where they learned to swim and handle the rowboat. His uncle's only concession to summer was a Panama hat and, once or twice if the day was very hot, he would take off his shoes and socks and sit on the dock dangling white feet in the water.

The summer at the cottage after Mike graduated from high school he and Uncle Clarence started taking long walks in the woods around the lake. That summer ended with Mike's sudden announcement that he would enter the seminary that fall. At the time, O'Malley thought that's what they'd been talking about on those walks, Mike's priestly vocation. Who, least of all Uncle Clarence, could object to having a priest in the family? Suddenly O'Malley became the one destined for Victory Public Relations.

At Easter vacation the following year his uncle took O'Malley along on a business trip to Niagara Falls, using the drive to give a fuller explanation of what Victory Public Relations did. "Some people want to keep their names before the public eye," he said. "Say anything about them good or bad as long as you mention their name. That's the city side of things. Then there's our side, the small-town side, people who'd be just as happy if they didn't get talked about at all."

And he explained how O'Malley's father got into the business. "He and a Mr. Gregory made a modest score in a penny mining-stock swindle. Your father was holding the money. On his way to divvy up, Mr. Gregory, a bit in his celebratory cups, drove into a tree. While his partner was in the hospital your father, whose bum ticker needed less strenuous work, decided to do the disappearing act with the ill-gotten gains. He used the money to buy out another gentleman, who proved to be the better swindler, grossly exaggerating the value of the dark secrets in his possession."

"You're saying we're blackmailers?" asked the boy, more disappointed than surprised.

Uncle Clarence, who seldom took his eyes off the road, looked over at him. "Tommy, we have to play the hand we're dealt. The money may be slow, but it's steady. Remember, we have your sisters and your mother to take care of. Thank the Lord for the small-town sense of shame."

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Niagara Falls was a place of mists, booming water, and rainbows. The high-end buyers used a large hotel downtown. Uncle Clarence stayed at a small, damp motel closer to the falls. The sellers who came there were peddling the bottom scrapings of their barrels. He heard them out and if he bought he paid them from small sums of money he'd hidden about the motel room.

Not long after the Niagara trip O'Malley's brother Mike left the seminary and moved to Vancouver to look for work. The priesthood had been his way of avoiding the family business.

When O'Malley made noises about finding another line of work, too, Uncle Clarence urged him to give things a chance. "I wasn't that happy at first myself," he admitted. "Here's some advice your father gave me. Oh, he had a rather deep bag of tricks behind the Irish good looks, your father. 'Tell them you're only the hired help,' he said. 'Make them believe a Mr. Gregory runs the operation.' That's right, using the name of the partner he'd swindled was your father's idea of a joke. 'Make Mr. Gregory a hard-hearted son-of-a-gun,' he said. 'Commiserate with them. Say you're sorry but Mr. Gregory has to have more money.' Well, he hit the nail on the head. It does make it easier.

"And speaking of Mr. Gregory, your father thought he could sit back in an office with Victory Public Relations on the door and watch the money roll in. But right after I came on board he saw his old partner limping down a nearby street. Just in case Mr. Gregory had tracked him down, your father gave me his pistol to keep in my desk in the outer office. Sure enough, one day when I was there alone Mr. Gregory burst in mad as hell, waving a gun, and pushed by me into your father's office. I got out the pistol and sent him off dragging a wing and swearing he'd get even. So if you ever see a tall guy with a limp and a shock of ginger hair, you'd be wise to do the same. I'll show you where I keep the pistol."

To sweeten the pot Uncle Clarence promised to teach O'Malley how to drive. He himself had come to driving late in life and didn't really enjoy it. And there was a lot of driving. "We make our collections personally," he explained. "We aren't in the line of work where we give out our address."

O'Malley remembered visiting their first client, a Mrs. Sutwell, whose dark secret he never discovered. "You stay here," said Uncle Clarence. "I should have warned you to bring a book." He was gone for several hours. When he came back he said, "A very lonely woman and one great talker."

When the woman died a few years back she left Uncle Clarence money in her will. "Ah, there are going to be a lot of tin ears in heaven," he said.

The funeral procession drove between the two brick columns into the cemetery parking area. The Catholic corner was set apart by stanchions and a chain. An undertaker's man opened a section of

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the chain and the hearse moved inside.

By the time the mourners made the walk from the parking lot to the cemetery plot the coffin lay over the open grave on the broad straps of the mechanism to lower it into the ground. Everyone gathered around on carpets of artificial grass lain over the raw earth.

When O'Malley's uncle had his stroke he had written everyone telling them Mr. Gregory had died, taking their secrets with him to the grave, and Victory Public Relations was no more. Even so, these few had come to bid Uncle Clarence goodbye.

There were the Dixons, she in her furs and he in his dove-gray chauffeur's uniform. When Dixon deserted his unit in World War II she spread the story that he'd been killed in action. He returned home with a beard and they pretended he was her chauffeur who lived in a room over the garage.

There were the Peacocks. When the first Mr. Peacock died he left her a substantial yearly income, provided she never remarried. Later she fell in love with a man who was as reluctant as she was to give up the money. So instead, he changed his name to Peacock and moved in.

Next to them was Dora Burke of the Burke sisters, looking her age at last. Her older sister Maude liked to dress up in the youngest fashions. Dora preferred an older, more conservative wardrobe. Their reputation for eccentric dress concealed the fact that they were unwed mother and daughter.

At the grave's edge was George Farley, looking very sad for he had faced Uncle Clarence across the cribbage board for years. Farley was a client by inheritance, so to speak. An elderly relative he knew only slightly had invited Farley to come for a visit, promising the trip would be to his profit. His host lived in a substantial yellow brick house in a town whose wide main street declared that it served a farm community where horses and wagons had once been common. One night the relative took Farley up to the attic and unlocked a door to a small room. There in a chair with her wrists between her knees sat a middle-aged woman with a round face and vacant eyes humming to herself. The man spoke to her kindly and called her Cousin Gladys. The tuneless humming continued. Farley's relative closed the door. As he turned the key in the lock he cautioned, "Watch out for her. Our Cousin Gladys is a crafty one."

On the way downstairs he told Farley that when he died his estate would go to Farley if he promised to take care of Cousin Gladys until she died and keep her existence a secret from everyone. He also mentioned the encumbrance of the blackmail payments, the result of a disgruntled housekeeper let go when his wife was still alive.

On O'Malley's first visit to the Farleys he and his uncle stayed for dinner, during which Farley passed over an envelope. "Here's for Mr. Gregory."

"Mr. Gregory thanks you," said Uncle Clarence.

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Afterwards, while Mrs. Farley was clearing away the dishes so her husband and Uncle Clarence could play some cribbage, O'Malley said he thought he heard the front door close. Farley jumped up. "Cousin Gladys is out again," he said.

Farley drove them down quiet streets of houses whose living rooms were lit a dim blue from early television screens. All of them squinted into the rain and darkness. "We've got to find her before she catches her death of cold," said Mrs. Farley.

Farley took them to places Cousin Gladys had gone before, a culvert under the railroad tracks, a treehouse behind an empty Queen Anne, an old toolshed. Finally he parked the car in front of the town band shell next to the heavy old machine gun, a memorial to the World War I dead. Farley got out, removed a section of latticework around the base of the band shell, and ducked inside. A moment later he came out with his arm around Cousin Gladys, humming to herself as best she could through lips trembling with cold. When they got back to the house Mrs. Farley took her up for a hot bath.

Years later, Cousin Gladys died. While Farley and Uncle Clarence played cribbage upstairs O'Malley dug a hole in the dirt floor in the basement and buried her. When he was done, they gathered for prayers over the body. "We will all of us lay down our heads on clay pillows soon enough," Uncle Clarence said.

Now the thing in the attic became the hump of dirt in the basement. The Farleys continued their payments.

At the end of the graveside ceremony the other mourners drifted back to the parking lot. O'Malley remained a little longer. It was hard for him to let go of something he'd been trying to figure out all these years. Oh, he knew why he'd stayed in the blackmailing business. On good days he'd say he owed it to his uncle, who'd helped him dispose of Mr. Gregory's body. On bad days it was because his uncle knew where that body was buried. But why had Uncle Clarence stayed?

O'Malley shook his head. Well, the priest and the limousine were waiting. As he turned his back on the grave he saw a tall, gray-headed man limping quickly toward him. He recognized Mr. Gregory, the man he'd shot over forty years ago. Mr. Gregory passed O'Malley with a muttered "I'm sorry I'm late. I expect I'll be late for my own funeral," and went to stand at the grave's edge in silence before adding his handful of earth to the coffin's lid.

When he turned and saw O'Malley's face he smiled. "No, I'm not a violation of the one-dead-man-per-funeral rule," he said. "I thought Clarence would have told you by now. No matter. My name's George Musgrove. Your uncle and I were good friends in the war. He saved my life when I got this." He slapped his leg. "I was only trying to help him out. He said he needed you. That little charade of ours, he said that was something he'd learned from your father, who had, I remember him putting it, a rather deep bag of tricks." ●

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FLOORED

by Twist Phelan

Lindsey McCallum hurried down the street of tall office buildings kept empty of cars by a guardhouse and concrete barricades. Lower Manhattan lay smothered under a heavy mist that thickened the air and slicked the oily pavement. She rounded the corner of the marble-faced building at the end of the street and slammed into a freezing blast of wind off the Hudson.

Sidestepping the nicotine junkies getting in their last smokes before the opening bell, Lindsey scanned the crowd streaming through the revolving doors into the New York Mercantile Exchange. She finally spotted Candace on the other side of the glass. Her friend waved her inside.

"Welcome to the Merc!" Candace Hale said, reaching out with both arms to pull Lindsey into the familiar warm embrace. Her voice was raspier, but otherwise Candace hadn't changed much since their high-school graduation five years ago. The blond mane still hung below her shoulders, the wide smile still featured a chipped tooth that turned what would have been cool patrician beauty into girl-next-door good looks. She was dressed in tailored pants, a dark blouse, and very ugly black boots with chunky heels that made her feet look enormous.

Candace followed Lindsey's gaze downward. "Not the cutest, I know, but a good choice when you have to stand all day. Plus they give me an extra two inches of height in the pit."

"If you're wearing them, they must be in style," Lindsey said. In high school, Candace had always been at the forefront of fashion, while Lindsey was more miss than hit. She still had the crocheted poncho to prove it.

Candace nodded at Lindsey's pumps. "I've got an extra pair of runners I can lend you. Did you remember your jacket?"

Lindsey opened her tote and took out a fuchsia-and-gray paisley

A commodity futures trader and former plaintiff's trial lawyer, Twist Phelan writes the Pinnacle Peak legal mystery series featuring endurance sports (which she participates in herself!). She has just completed a stand-alone novel set in the financial world, the setting she has chosen for her short story debut in *EQMM*.

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polyester coat. "It looks like something an acid-tripping lab tech would wear."

"You can forget about fashion on the Floor. The colors make it easier for the other traders to find us. And patterns are good—they hide the ink marks. Things get pretty wild on a busy day. Glasses smashed, noses broken—once a guy got stabbed with a pen."

"Sounds like they should require safety glasses . . . and body armor," Lindsey said, not altogether joking. She knew being a floor trader was as much a physical challenge as a mental one. But after the last two years, she was definitely up for it.

At the beginning of her junior year at Montana State, Lindsey had discovered that her boyfriend was cheating on her, though not in the usual manner. Using her credit cards and online bank password, Steven had emptied her account of the tuition money from her parents and run up a fifty-thousand-dollar debt on her credit cards. Then he had lost it all in less than a month, day-trading on the computer.

"I don't know," was all Steven could mumble when she demanded he tell her where the money had gone.

Beyond broke, Lindsey dumped Steven, dropped out, and moved back home to Missoula to finish her degree through night school at the local community college. Deciding she was better with numbers than with people, she took a job in the accounting department of an insurance company. Tim, her high-school boyfriend, asked her out again, but she told him no—she'd had it with men for a while. Instead of dating, she spent her free time on stock-market simulations, trying to understand how Steven could have lost so much so fast.

Lindsey quickly realized the biggest returns could be made in the futures markets, where contracts were bought and sold for the future delivery of a specific commodity at a specific price. She narrowed her focus to crude oil because of its liquidity and low transaction costs. Unlike her ex, she was a quick study, and soon began investing real money. It took almost a year, but eventually she made enough to pay off her debts and buy a car.

On a whim, she attended her five year high-school reunion, and ran into Candace in the buffet line. Best friends in high school, the two women had not seen each other since Candace had headed to New York right before Lindsey left for college.

"Acting wasn't for me," Candace explained after they exchanged hugs. "All those auditions! But I had to pay the rent, so I got a job tending bar at this place in Tribeca. A lot of traders went there after the markets closed and . . ."

Over crudités and white wine, Lindsay listened in amazement as her friend recounted how she had worked her way from tending bar to a position as a natural-gas trader for one of the well-known futures brokers on the New York Mercantile Exchange. Zeibel Brokerage was not only headed by a woman, it employed only women—unique in the world of commodity futures, where most

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traders were white male New Yorkers in their twenties and thirties.

"Wow, that's terrific," Lindsey said. She raised her glass of Chardonnay. "Here's to you!" She smiled at her friend, recalling other celebrations—Candace setting a school record in the 100-yard low hurdles, Candace winning the lead in the school play, Candace getting top marks on the French final after many late nights of tutoring from Lindsey.

Candace sipped from her glass. "So what about you? What have you been up to?"

"Actually, I'm doing some trading, too," Thinking it remarkable how their lives had run along parallel routes, Lindsey described her success on the computer.

Candace seemed delighted, and immediately encouraged Lindsey to come to New York for an interview. "Do you want to be stuck in Missoula forever? This is the real thing, Lynz—you gotta go for it!"

Lindsey had to admit that her evenings on the computer were starting to feel lonely, and too far removed from reality. On the computer all that mattered was speed—the first person to enter the best bid got the buy. But trading on the Floor depended on relation-ships and fast thinking as well as quick reflexes. Lindsey thought about her cubicle at the insurance company. "Is Zeibel hiring?" she asked.

The interview went well, and Lindsey received a job offer. Six weeks later, after taking the necessary courses and passing the requisite exams, she was about to start her first day as a crude-oil trader.

She and Candace joined the line at the security checkpoint. "Ready to make some money?" Candace asked.

"I think so," Lindsey said, glancing at the traders standing behind them. Some of the men stared back, but most looked away. She lowered her voice.

"Part of me wishes I were still in my pajamas, in front of my computer at home. I've heard stories about how women are treated on the Floor. The guys either blow you off or try to screw you—one way or the other."

Candace nodded. "There are two groups here—the gentlemen's club and the boys' club. Or, as you'll soon find out, a few good and the mostly bad. But don't worry, I'll give you the down-low on which traders go out of their way to take advantage of us, and clue you in on the scams. The locals are the worst—real cowboys."

Lindsey knew that "locals" were the true entrepreneurs of the Floor, trading for their own accounts rather than executing orders for clients, like Zeibel did. "Everyone in class talked about making enough money to buy their own seat."

"They better have the balls to go with it." Candace laughed, then moved closer. "Sometimes we give the jerks as good as we get. Just last week I made a few extra thousand dollars front-running on a big order."

Lindsey's eyes widened. "Isn't that . . ." She didn't want to say the

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word. "Front-running" meant using inside knowledge to trade ahead of another order. If a trader knew a big buy was coming in, he would purchase the commodity, then sell at a profit after the larger order bumped up the price.

"Illegal?" Candace said. "Sure. But only if you're doing the front-running—*I* was the one with the big buy order. My clerk signaled it into the ring, and I repeated it back to her, making sure these two traders in the pit saw me do it. They're always watching for a chance to front-run on me." The look in Candace's eyes showed her delight. "This time I made it easy for them."

"I don't get it," Lindsey said. "Why did you want them to get ahead of your trade?"

"Because they didn't know my clerk had also signaled to *reverse* the trade." Candace demonstrated by tugging on her ear. "The guys put in buy orders, anticipating an uptick or two after my buy order hit. But I sold instead, and my client made an extra forty cents a contract. Front-running from behind—not the nicest thing to do to those guys, but legal."

Lindsey knew Candace was right—the other traders were the ones who had broken the law. And if they were brokers, their clients had paid the price. "Wish we'd learned about this stuff in those how-to-be-a-trader classes," she said.

"Watch what I do and you'll learn fast enough."

Lindsey winked at her friend. "You've always been my designated role model."

Candace slid her laminated ID card into the slot on the turnstile. "We need to hurry. You don't want to make Michelle handle all of the morning's orders by herself."

After they cleared security, Lindsey followed Candace down a windowless hall and into a small locker room. Candace twirled the dial on a combination lock, opened the door, and pulled out a jacket that matched Lindsey's. Once on, the oversized garment swallowed up her small frame. She reached into the locker again, this time extracting a pair of athletic shoes.

"Here—hope we still wear the same size." In high school, the girls had gym during different periods, and Candace had borrowed Lindsey's sneakers whenever she forgot to bring her own.

Lindsey laced on the runners and wiggled her toes. "Perfect fit." She grabbed a bottle of water from her tote.

"I'd pass on that, unless you've got a strong bladder," Candace said. "If the market's crazy, it means five hours without a bathroom break."

Lindsey dropped the bottle back into her tote.

"Put your stuff in my locker for now," Candace said. "We'll get you one of your own after the close today." She unwrapped an energy bar and tore it into small pieces. After dividing them evenly between two sandwich baggies from a box in her locker, she handed one of the baggies to Lindsey. "This will help keep you going."

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"But—" Lindsey knew eating on the Floor risked a minimum two-hundred-dollar fine.

Candace gave a dismissive wave. "Just make sure nobody from the Floor Committee sees you chewing. It's a dumb rule anyway. All because of the rats."

"Rats?"

"The Exchange is paranoid about them. If they can't find food, the little buggers eat the insulation around computer wires. Remember that squirrel that chewed through the power lines at NASDAQ and stopped trading for an hour? One of the biggest nightmares around here is of a rodent bringing down the world's energy markets."

Candace clipped a yellow badge to her jacket collar. The square of plastic was engraved with four letters—CAND—followed by her full name in smaller print. Traders chose their badge symbols. Usually based on a trader's name, they sometimes referred to trading or hobbies. Already Lindsey had seen OPEC, KRMA, and BIGG. She attached her own badge, printed with her initials: LAM. Candace pointed at the letters.

"Don't be surprised if the guys call you *Lamb* or *Lambie*. If they do, go along with it. A dozen of us against hundreds of them means you gotta roll with the punches, or at least seem to. If someone grabs your ass, don't report him. Instead, tell me, and we'll get payback on a trade. Never let them see you upset or scared or, worst of all, crying. Go hide in the women's bathroom if you think you're coming apart." She slammed shut the locker door. "Let's go—it's a quarter after ten. We've already missed the opening."

The energy pits were two flights up. Candace and Lindsey took the stairs. Once on the trading floor, Lindsey paused, momentarily disoriented by the noise, the brightly colored jackets, the flashing neon numbers. People shouted and gestured and hurried from one place to another. Crude oil, heating oil, gasoline, natural gas, propane, coal—this was where prices were set for the fuels that ran the world's economies.

Each commodity had its own pit, small amphitheaters with four tiers of steps descending to a hub. Traders stood shoulder-to-shoulder on each level, three persons deep, leaning against each other and the metal railings for support. They screamed, pushed, and waved their arms in their effort to buy or sell at the best price.

Candace grasped Lindsey's elbow and steered her through the tangle of wires and cables strewn across the floor to the row of computers and telephones around the perimeter of the room. They halted next to a young black woman holding two phones to her ear with one hand while typing with the other. "This is the clerk who'll be feeding you orders," Candace said into Lindsey's ear, then raised her voice.

"DeShawna, this is Lindsey, the new crude trader." The woman interrupted her typing long enough to yank open a drawer.

"Your trade pad and pit cards. Got a pen?" she said.

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Lindsey felt like a fool. "I left it in—"

Candace pulled a marker from a pocket of her trading coat. "Here. Always use black ink—never red." She flashed her wide grin. "A trader always wants to be in the black."

Lindsey picked up the trade pad and pit cards. The stiff cardboard edges dug into her palm.

"You better get down there," DeShawna said, the phones still pressed to her ear. "Michelle is out with the flu and I've got orders coming down."

Lindsey felt her stomach do a little flip-flop. She had been counting on following the senior trader's lead for the first few days.

Candace took some of Lindsey's pit cards. "I'll help you get started."

"You can do that?" Lindsey asked. Although entitled to trade any of the energy products, traders usually specialized in a particular commodity.

"Nothing's happening in gas right now," Candace said. She walked Lindsey to the edge of the crude-oil pit, where two hundred traders were in full cry. "New traders usually start on the lowest level. Ready?"

"Ready," Lindsey said, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

She followed Candace into the crowd of traders, pushing and bumping against the men as she made her way into the pit. The odor of too many bodies too close together made her want to cover her nose. A few traders met her eyes, several stared at her breasts. "Check out that ass," someone muttered.

Lindsey kept a poker face, determined not to show her embarrassment. She thought back to her first high-school party. She had been standing against a wall, clutching an unopened bottle of beer and enduring the up-and-down glances of teenaged boys, until Candace rescued her. Once within the aura of her friend's popularity, she had a good time. A few weeks later, Candace had fixed her up with Tim.

After finding them a spot, Candace turned to look at DeShawna. Lindsey followed her gaze. Using hand signs, the clerk fed them an order. Candace responded with a flamboyant salute.

DeShawna had instructed them to sell two hundred December at the market, not held. That meant the client wanted to sell two hundred contracts at the current market price, but the floor broker had discretion in terms of timing. *Two hundred contracts.* Despite the hubbub of men shouting around her, for a moment all Lindsey knew was the pounding of her heart, so hard it was nearly painful.

She glanced up at the neon numbers flashing on the electronic quote boards mounted on the wall. Crude oil moved up or down in one-cent increments, but often jumped ten, twenty cents at a time. She noted the current price. With one contract worth a thousand barrels, she had just been told to move over twelve million dollars' worth of crude.

"Take your time," Candace said into Lindsey's ear. "If the other

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traders realize you have a big order, they'll run down the market."

The brokerage earned a commission on every transaction, whether it was a winner or a loser, but Lindsey knew bad fills meant unhappy customers. Clients didn't want to hear that a sell order placed when the market was at sixty had been filled at fifty-nine eighty.

"Show a small number," Candace said. "Forty or fifty contracts. I'll work it, too. Once you're in a rhythm, I'll leave you alone to finish the rest of the order." She raised her hand and started to bounce as if she were jumping rope.

"Fifty Deece at a half! Fifty Deece at a half!" she shouted, flashing the sign for the contract month, then touching her forehead and holding up five fingers to signify fifty contracts. Next, she moved her hand to the right with all five fingers straight up to show the price, palm facing away from her to indicate that she was selling.

"Fifty Deece at a half!" Lindsey called, duplicating Candace's hand gestures, although not as smoothly or swiftly.

"Louder!" Candace said, then yelled again, "Fifty Deece at a half!"

A man wearing a red jacket on the other side of the pit pointed at Candace. "Thirty bid!"

"Sold twenty," Candace shouted back.

Lindsey was confused. "Why'd you hit the bid?" *Sold twenty at thirty* meant Candace had unloaded twenty contracts at sixty dollars and thirty cents per barrel.

"It's always better to have some of the order sold in case the market dumps. Here, gimme your pad. That way you'll get credit for the trade."

Candace jotted down the details on price, quantity, and delivery month, plus the badge symbol of the man in the red coat, on both a pit card and Lindsey's trade pad. She then Frisbeed the card toward the man sitting behind a low counter at the center of the pit.

Wearing a baseball hat and glasses as protection from the flying pieces of cardboard, the pit clerk gathered up the cards and time-stamped them. The cards were then delivered to the data-entry room, where their information would be keyed into the Exchange's computers.

Lindsey glanced up at the quote board and felt herself break into a sweat. December crude was down a dime, or a hundred dollars a contract. She had yet to sell anything and already the market was moving away from her. She screamed out the new offer price. "FIFTY DEECE AT FORTY! FIFTY DEECE AT FORTY!" Spit sprayed from her mouth but she didn't care.

"There!" Candace pointed. "The guy in the bright blue coat with lightning bolts. I don't know his badge, but I think he's a local."

Lindsey scanned the crowd until she saw a jacket in an electric shade of cobalt with yellow zigzags on the lapels. The young man wearing it was waving in her direction.

"Buy 'em!" he yelled.

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"Done!" Lindsey yelled back. Elated, she reached for her trade pad to record the sale.

"I'll write it up—you keep working the order," Candace said as the roar around them increased. From the other side of the pit someone screamed, "Half for Deece."

"Okay." Feeling a bit more confident now, Lindsey raised her hand, ready to continue selling the order, when the trader on her right turned to her. He glanced at her badge.

"Hey, Lamb Chop, how many you got left at forty?"

Lindsey winced at the nickname. "Hundred and twenty," she said, wondering if it was too late to change her badge acronym.

"I'll take 'em."

Candace yanked on Lindsey's sleeve. "No! It's half bid!"

Horrified, Lindsey checked the quote board. In fretting over her badge name, she had blanked out the market's move up ten cents a contract. *Half for Deece.* She'd just given away twelve thousand dollars of her client's money. Sweat began to trickle down her ribs.

The trader turned up his hands in a gesture of innocence. "Hey, all I did was lift her offer."

"That's BS, Tommy. You know she missed the move. It's no trade." Candace lowered her voice. "I seem to remember Michelle went to you last week with a pretty big order—instead of spreading it around the whole pit. Do you really want to be on Zeibel's freeze-out list?"

Tommy's neck reddened. "You little piece of—"

"There you go, flirting with me again." Candace said airily, then hardened her tone again. "So it's no trade, right?"

Tommy threw her a sour look. "Whatever." He turned his back and called "Half for a hundred Deece" across the pit.

Lindsey let out the breath she had been holding. "Thanks."

Candace handed Lindsey her trade pad. "If you don't stand up for yourself, these guys will eat you alive. And a little leverage doesn't hurt, either. See why we girls have to stick together?"

"Yeah," Lindsey said. She had never seen Candace bully someone before.

"Always know where you are on your order and what the market is doing. Watch the boards, pay attention to what the other traders are saying, even make notes on a pit card if you need to." Candace patted Lindsey's arm. "Don't worry—it'll be second nature before you know it." She glanced over at the natural-gas pit, where the volume was starting to pick up. "I should get over there. You good to finish out the order?"

Lindsey nodded.

"If you need help, have DeShawna give me a call." Candace held up a fist. Lindsey made one, too, and touched her knuckles to her friend's.

"To sisterhood," Candace said.

"Sisterhood," Lindsey repeated.

❖ ❖ ❖

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It was a half-hour until the end of the trading day and Lindsey was exhausted. She had barely kept up with DeShawna's orders, but had managed to execute them all without any major problems.

Lindsey was paging through her trade pad, reviewing the transactions, when she saw it. She read the entry twice to be sure, then pushed her way out of the oil pit to find Candace.

Her friend was trading from the top level of the natural-gas ring. "I need to talk to you," Lindsey said, trying to stay calm.

Candace signaled to her clerk that she was taking a break, then walked with Lindsey to the edge of the Floor, away from the crowd. "What's the matter?"

Lindsey held out her order pad. "The second trade, the one with the guy in the blue coat with the lightning bolts. You wrote down twenty, but I did the trade at forty."

Candace squinted at the pad, brow furrowed. "Wasn't crude at thirty when the order first came in?"

Lindsey shook her head. "The offer was at fifty, and you made the first sale at thirty. The market moved up, and I did the next trade."

Candace made a face. "My bad, Lynz. I must have been looking at the natural-gas numbers. How did you find out about this? Did DeShawna say something?"

"No. I happened to catch it looking through my order pad."

Candace draped an arm around Lindsey's shoulders and pulled her close. "If you haven't heard from DeShawna, that means the customer hasn't noticed anything, and at this point probably won't. Let it go. You don't want to break a trade your first day. All that paperwork and explaining will make you look bad to the Exchange and the other traders."

"But that local made ten grand off our client!"

Candace's breath was soft on Lindsey's cheek. "This is not the kind of mistake you want to call attention to. Trust me." She squeezed Lindsey's shoulder, then stepped away. "I have to get back for the close. Meet you in the locker room after the bell? I'll have to dash—analyst meeting upstairs. But lunch tomorrow for sure. My treat."

Lindsey walked toward the subway station, swinging her tote bag. After grabbing a bite at a deli, she had gone shopping for shoes to wear on the Floor, choosing twins to the ones Candace had been wearing. She bought a knitted scarf, too. Even though red was her favorite color, she had chosen black.

The cacophony of rush hour was at full volume, but after a day on the Floor, the horns' blare no longer seemed so strident. Clouds heavy with impending rain hung low over the city, while an icy wind cut down alleys and surged around buildings. Wrapped in her new scarf, Lindsey leaned into the gusts.

At the corner she halted and waited for the light to change. Across the street was a small restaurant. The interior glowed through glass

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windows like a lantern in the gathering dark. Lindsey could see patrons seated at small tables reading menus, chatting, sipping wine. Toward the back, she glimpsed a mane of blond hair.

The light changed and Lindsey started across the street. At the curb she glanced into the restaurant again and realized that the blonde was Candace, seated alone at a table for two. As Lindsey watched, her friend opened her menu and started to read through the selections.

A waiter brushed by the jacket hung over the vacant chair, setting yellow lightning bolts dancing against the bright blue background.

Boys' club . . . we girls have to stick together . . . trust me. Lindsey suddenly felt a numbness that had nothing to do with the biting chill of the wind.

Memories from high school flashed through her brain, scenes she had long since shoved to the back of her mind—Candace "finding" Lindsey's missing PDA with her study notes right after the French final, Candace climbing out of the backseat of Tim's car, buttoning her shirt. . . . Added to them was a new scene, the one from this morning—Candace's salute, a signal to the young man in the blue coat that the trade would be written in his favor.

As Lindsey watched, the same man slid into the empty chair across from Candace and laid a thick envelope on the table. Candace raised her champagne flute; the golden liquid sparkled in the light.

Sisterhood. Female traders were no better than their male counterparts—breaking Floor rules, front-running, writing up false trades. *A few good and mostly bad.* After only one day, Lindsey had seen enough to know which kind of trader she wanted to be. And now her "role model" was going to know it too.

She strode into the restaurant, unwinding the new scarf from around her neck as she made her way through the tables. She halted beside Candace's chair, her frozen cheeks burning in the overheated room as though they'd been slapped.

Boys' club . . . we girls have to stick together . . . trust me.

Candace glanced up, then did a double take. "Lynz! What a sur—"

"I thought you were my friend," Lindsey said, twisting the scarf between her hands.

"Hey," said the trader who owned the blue jacket, nervousness in his voice. Slim and good-looking, he had jet-black hair slicked back in a 'fifties way. He got to his feet, jostling the table and spilling Champagne onto the white tablecloth, staining it gold.

Lindsey ignored him and moved behind Candace's chair, holding the scarf so tightly her fingers were numb.

"I *am* your friend, Lynz," Candace said. She swiveled to gaze up at Lindsey, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. The naked skin of her neck and shoulders gleamed in the low light.

Lindsey unwound the scarf from around her hands and let it drop onto the table. "So where the hell is my cut?" ●

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EXERCISE IS MURDER

by Meredith S. Cole

The plunge into the cold water nearly took her breath away. Lydia McKenzie told herself it was for a good cause and started to do the breaststroke. After a few brisk laps, she started to get used to it. Every once in a while, one of the fast swimmers in the center lane launched into the butterfly stroke and sent large waves across the pool. It was like swimming in the ocean. When a big wave washed over her head, she swallowed a little water: heavily chlorinated and very unpleasant.

Brutally hot in the city and worse underground in the subway, New Yorkers bared as much skin as possible in the summer. And that was Lydia's problem. Winter's worries, and a job with two Italian-American private eyes whose mother ran a restaurant, had caused Lydia to overindulge in cannoli and cappuccinos. There was no way she was going to fit into her lovely vintage summer frocks without exercise.

Lydia avoided exercise whenever possible. Yoga made her anxious. Running hurt. And she felt silly jumping around in an aerobics class. She biked around the city, but it did nothing to diminish the size of her stomach. She needed to do something before she turned into a blob. She couldn't afford to go shopping for more clothes, and besides, her vintage finds were one of a kind. So she decided to join the local pool and start swimming. She had always enjoyed swimming in a lake as a child in Ohio. Although she had hated many things about summer camp (early wake-up and ugly

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camp T-shirts were her main complaints), she had learned how to swim there.

The Metropolitan Pool was a city pool, and the price to join fit even her limited budget. The building had originally been a bathhouse and was designed by Henry Bacon, the same architect who had designed the Lincoln Memorial. The ceiling over the pool was one giant skylight made of iron and glass and the ground floor had graceful arched doorways. Everything else the city had constructed since the 1940s was ugly, dirty, cracked, and peeling. Here Lydia was able to stare at the ceiling and pretend that only the historical details existed.

The pool had only three lanes, and every single one was stuffed with people. The right lane was for the slowest of the slow. Senior citizens floated around doing half-hearted water-aerobics exercises —a woman kept diving down to the bottom and flipping around as if she were trying out for a water ballet—and a few old guys were doing an extremely slow version of the crawl and miraculously managing to avoid hitting anyone. The middle lane was filled with extremely fast swimmers all splashing down from one end to the other and then doing powerful flip turns that sent large waves up over the edge of the pool. The far left lane was full of swimmers doing different strokes and moving along fairly well. Lydia knew her limitations, but also knew she wasn't quite ready for senior center, so she got into the far left lane.

After ten laps, she became bored. She started to watch the fast swimmers, pretending that she was there to watch them for her private-eye bosses. They each had a pile of high-tech gear, and there seemed to be a competition over who had the fanciest water bottle, goggles, and swim fins. She began to wonder idly who was the fastest, and who would pass the others. One heavily muscled tall woman in a black swimsuit was clearly going faster than anyone else, her hands topped by long red fingernails chopping through the water in front of her. Half the time she didn't bother to swim on the right side; she just swam up the middle passing everyone. There were a couple of guys, though, who were trying to keep up. One wore a tiny green Speedo suit and didn't bother wearing a swim cap on his bald head. There was a short, stocky woman in a blue suit who was going far slower than all the other swimmers and never stopped to let any of them pass. A few minutes later, a woman in a red Speedo with a lithe athletic build arrived, grimly putting on her goggles. Lydia guessed that she was going to give the black-swimsuit woman her first real challenge.

The red-Speedo woman jumped in and began to swim, her arms churning through the water. She was fast, faster even than black-swimsuit woman. But black-swimsuit woman didn't move over. Red-swimsuit woman passed her on the right, and when they got to the wall and both tried to do their flip turns they collided with a

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loud smack and a tsunami-sized wave. Lydia winced in sympathy and paused by the wall in the deep end to watch the action.

"What do you think you're doing?" Black-swimsuit woman was incensed. "You're not supposed to pass on the right, Morgan!"

"You wouldn't get over, slowpoke," Morgan, the red-swimsuit woman, sneered. "What did you expect, Shari?"

Neither swimmer would back down. They continued to scream at each other. When Lydia peeked at the lifeguard, she saw that he was doing his best to ignore the confrontation, probably hoping it would dissipate on its own. The green-Speedo man fiddled around with his water bottle as if he was hoping to avoid the arguers. Finally Shari hefted herself out of the water and went to complain.

Morgan went back to her laps, angrily going even faster. She was easy for Lydia to keep track of because she continued to have near accidents all the way down the lane. She almost collided with a few other swimmers, including the green-Speedo man and the chubby woman, and they did their best to get out of her way after she glared at them. Apparently Shari didn't get the answer she wanted, because the lifeguard just shrugged and she returned to the pool with an angry splash. Lydia craned her head to see into the other lane as she swam her next lap, and she nearly collided with another swimmer.

"Sorry," Lydia said. But the other swimmer, an elderly Chinese woman, just shot her a dirty look and continued swimming.

On the next lap back, Lydia carefully avoided the other swimmers, and almost didn't notice the splash of red at the bottom of the pool in the center lane. Without goggles it was hard to see, but she knew whatever it was hadn't been there on her last lap. Had someone dropped a kickboard? But kickboards normally floated. Taking a breath, Lydia put her head underwater and opened her eyes. Morgan, the woman with the red swimsuit, was sinking to the bottom of the pool.

Lydia came up sputtering. "Help! Help! Someone's drowning!"

The lifeguard got up slowly and frowned at her. If the swimmer was going to have any hope of surviving she had to be brought up fast. Lydia took a deep breath and dove down towards the bottom of the pool. But she didn't have enough breath to reach her. She resurfaced in the middle of the fast lane in front of Shari, the black-swimsuited woman.

"What are you doing?" Shari shouted at her.

"Woman at the bottom of the pool. Help me," Lydia said, pointing down.

Shari looked down, horrified. They dove down together. Lydia was determined to make her breath last this time. It was truly a matter of life and death. She reached Morgan just after Shari and together they hauled her back up to the surface. Lydia's lungs were burning as she sucked in a lungful of air, and the lifeguard at last jumped into the pool to help them with the rescue.

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The lifeguard dragged Morgan's limp body out of the pool and began to give her CPR. Lydia and Shari and the other swimmers gathered nearby in the deep end. As ghoulish as it was to watch, it seemed more heartless and horrible to continue swimming. Through the windows she saw one of the guards talking on the phone, probably to a 911 dispatcher. She hoped it wasn't too late. Morgan was a powerful swimmer, and Lydia wondered what had gone wrong.

The EMTs arrived a few minutes later. One of them stepped in to take over CPR, and the lifeguard stepped wearily away.

"Pool's closed, everybody. Sorry. No more swimming today."

The swimmers, one by one, got out of the pool and collected their possessions. Only Morgan's red water bottle, swim fins, and kickboard were left. They looked so lonely. Lydia got her towel and wiped her face. If she had an accident, she would want someone to take care of her stuff. She doubted the pool would know what to do with it, and would probably just throw it all away. She reluctantly bent down and picked the things up. She would ask one of the swimmers who knew Morgan what to do with them.

The women's locker room was unnaturally hushed. The swimmers whispered to each other in the shower and by the lockers. Shari, despite her earlier fight with Morgan, looked the most heartbroken as she sat with her head in her hands on a bench. The chubby woman with the blue suit was sitting with her.

"It's okay, Shari. She didn't die because you had a fight."

"I shouldn't have pushed it, but I hated how mean she got."

The chubby woman shrugged. "She wasn't being very thoughtful."

Lydia tried to pretend she wasn't listening as she fumbled with her combination lock.

"Thanks, Kathleen. I guess I'll get dressed." Shari pushed herself up off the bench and walked toward the shower.

Kathleen watched Shari go, shaking her head

"Do you think she drowned?" Lydia asked her.

The chubby woman looked at Lydia in surprise. She had beautiful bright green eyes, and looked more attractive without her bathing cap. "I don't know. Morgan was a very good swimmer."

"I wish I'd seen what happened."

"That lifeguard wouldn't notice if we all died in there, I always say. Too busy watching the baseball game."

Lydia showed her Morgan's stuff. "I picked up Morgan's things. It didn't seem right to leave them lying there. Do you know who I should give them to in case Morgan doesn't make it?"

Kathleen sighed. "Since Paul isn't her husband anymore, I'm not sure who it should be."

"Paul?" Lydia said, confused. Kathleen acted as if she should know who everyone was.

"You know, that bald guy in the green Speedo. He was Morgan's husband."

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Lydia didn't have to wait long to find out Morgan's fate. An obituary appeared a few days later in the *New York Times.* Morgan Raymond had been a graphic designer and was just thirty-eight when she drowned accidentally at the Metropolitan Pool in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. She left behind one sister, Guinevere Raymond, in Long Island City. Lydia read the obituary through several times before picking up the phone and dialing a familiar number. Homicide detective Daniel Romero of the New York Police Department wasn't just good at his job, he was also someone Lydia knew personally. He would answer her questions.

After they had taken care of the preliminary greetings, Lydia got right to the point. "How can the cops tell if a drowning death was accidental?"

Romero groaned. "Don't tell me you were at the Met Pool. I thought you didn't exercise."

"I may stop now that I know how dangerous it is."

"What do you know about it? Did you see something?"

Lydia turned to look at Morgan's measly pile of possessions sitting on her counter. They smelled strongly of chlorine and something else Lydia couldn't quite place. She had stuck them in her bag after she had forgotten to hand them over to Shari or Kathleen, and now she felt obliged to deal with them. "She was fighting with another swimmer before she died, and apparently her ex-husband was in the lane, too."

Romero sighed. "Morgan was a world-class swimmer. She won medals up the wazoo in college and was apparently an Olympic hopeful at one point. She was a strong swimmer, at home in the water. Someone would have had to forcibly hold her down in order to get her to drown."

Lydia frowned. "And if she was such a strong swimmer, how could it have happened accidentally?"

"She probably went into cardiac arrest and drowned. Or she could have had a cramp. I don't know."

Lydia went silent, thinking. She hadn't seen anyone hold Morgan down, but during those last several laps she hadn't been paying attention. Surely that would have been noticed in such a small pool. But then again, she would think someone would notice a heart attack, too.

"Stay out of it, okay? Her family and friends are broken up and don't need you sticking your nose into it."

Lydia sniffed, offended. "Thanks for the information," she said and hung up on him. She hated his stuffy attitude. Despite his warning, she decided she would deliver Morgan's things to her sister. Perhaps having them back would give her comfort. Lydia made a call to information, and discovered that Guinevere Raymond of Long Island City was indeed listed.

Guinevere sounded surprised to hear from Lydia, and not that

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interested in repossessing Morgan's swimming things. "She had them with her when she died?"

"Yes. I don't want to keep them. I just thought her next of kin should have them back. It would be no trouble for me to drop them off at your place."

"Okay. I guess so." Guinevere gave her her address and Lydia wrote it down. Once Morgan's things were disposed of, she told herself she would let this one go. No one wanted her involved, and everyone agreed it was one of those terrible accidents that just happened inexplicably sometimes.

Guinevere lived in one of the new fancy condo buildings that were going up all over. They had a special buzzer system that only took Lydia five minutes of fumbling to figure out. Once she was buzzed in, she made her way to the gleaming elevators and took one up to the sixth floor. Everything was shiny and new, but looked cheaply made, as if it was already prepared to be brought down to make way for something even newer. Morgan's sister was waiting for her outside her apartment door. Something she saw in Lydia seemed to reassure her, and she stepped back and invited Lydia into her place.

The apartment looked as if its owner had walked into one of the chain furniture stores and ordered everything out of the display. The furniture was arranged and the posters on the wall were framed, but nothing looked as if it was ever sat on or enjoyed. There were hardly any personal touches to tell you who Guinevere might be.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Lydia began as she sat on the edge of the plump white sofa. "The obituary didn't mention any other family. . . ."

Guinevere shook her head and played with a simple gold chain around her neck. "We lost our parents while we were in our twenties. And the rest of our family was never close."

"Are you a graphic designer, too?"

"No. I'm an accountant." Guinevere looked around the room in a way that made Lydia nervous. She seemed uncomfortable in her own skin. "You were there in the pool when she died?"

Lydia nodded. "So was her ex-husband, although I didn't know it at the time."

Guinevere twisted the necklace violently so it cut into her neck. "Paul. He broke Morgan's heart when he took up with Shari. She never forgave him."

The pool was beginning to seem like some sort of soap opera, and Lydia was having trouble keeping the relationships straight. Lydia took out the small bag she'd brought and handed it over. "These were her things from the deck of the pool. I didn't want them to be thrown away."

Guinevere looked at the objects sadly. "Thanks."

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In the spring in Williamsburg they had pollution instead of pollen. Instead of flowers, they had trash. Instead of giant flowering trees, they had skinny anemic ones that grew the best they could in their tiny spaces in the sidewalk. But the industrial neighborhood turned hipster community across the river from Manhattan was home to Lydia McKenzie. She breathed in the not-so-fresh air, grateful to have a rent-stabilized apartment in her increasingly expensive and trendy neighborhood, and went off not to exercise, but to get a trim.

"Why so glum, Sugar? Tired of the red already?" Georgia Rae asked as she put the apron around Lydia's neck. She was the owner of the salon and also Lydia's best friend.

"I like the red. It's just that woman who drowned. Something about it feels wrong."

"You need a massage or something to help you relax."

"Have you got a new masseur named Sven hidden in the back?" Lydia shut her eyes as the water from the sink flowed over her head and did her best to let her clenched muscles relax.

"No. But Susie could give you a manicure on the house. She's practicing her technique."

Lydia's nails were a mess. She had been studiously ignoring them lately, hoping they would miraculously look better on their own. "I could stand that. But no press-ons. I need to be able to type."

After Georgia had snipped a little here and there and blow-dried Lydia's hair, Lydia sat in the chair as Susie knelt in front of her and massaged her hands. Lydia could see how regular manicures could become addictive. They were so unnecessary and decadent.

"Oops," Susie said with a grimace. "I went over a bit with the purple passion." She whipped out the nail-polish remover and dabbed at Lydia's nail. The smell of the acetone was strong.

"How can you stand that smell all day?"

Susie shrugged. "You get used to it, but you have to be careful. It can mess with your head."

Lydia was intrigued. "By smelling it?"

"Or swallowing it. I hear some people do that for fun."

Lydia wrinkled her nose. She was always shocked at what people would do for an easy high. "Ugh. That has to taste terrible."

"Yeah. Causes hallucinations."

Susie waved her hands and the fumes hit Lydia again. It oddly reminded her of the pool. The smell there should just have been of chlorine, so why would she associate acetone with swimming? She watched Susie spread the purple across the surface of her nail and remembered those red talons cutting though the water.

As soon as her nails were dry, Lydia punched Romero's phone number into her cell phone. "Let's just suppose that someone were to drink nail-polish remover. What would happen?"

"I'm no poison expert . . ." Romero began, "but I do know that's

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a street drug."

"But too much would poison you, right?"

"Sure. Probably send you into cardiac arrest."

"There's no way they would have tested Morgan Raymond for that, though."

"We already ruled that death as accidental. What are you getting at?"

"But if someone poisoned her, how could you find out?"

"Someone would probably have to figure out how they did it and go from there. The poison would have had to work very quickly."

"Did the husband get anything in the will?"

Romero was silent. Lydia took it as a yes. "Seems mighty suspicious that her ex was swimming with her at the time and inherits something. I thought the husbands were the first ones you guys checked."

She smiled when Romero abruptly hung up on her. She heard the next day that they'd arrested Paul and were doing an autopsy on Morgan. She imagined that they had also been to Guinevere's to pick up the water bottle. The picture of Paul in the paper made him look like a scared rabbit. Justice had been served, but the more she thought about it, the more she wondered if they had really caught the killer. She didn't think a man would think to use nail-polish remover to poison someone. Maybe he had an accomplice, and she was getting away with murder.

Lydia had no idea where Shari lived, so she went to the one place that she knew she would show up: the pool. She staked out a bench in the locker room and waited. Eventually Shari breezed in and began to put her black swimsuit on. Her nails were now bright blue.

"Excuse me—I don't know if you remember me . . ." Lydia began.

"You're the one who first noticed Morgan!" Shari gasped.

"If she hadn't been wearing a red swimsuit . . ." Lydia said modestly.

"It was just too terrible," Shari said with a small sob. "She was my best friend and an amazing swimmer. But I can't believe that Paul would kill her."

"When did you two start dating?"

"Long after he and Morgan split up. It really wasn't working, though. Paul was a little too possessive."

"Do you know if anyone else was upset with her lately?"

Shari shook her head. "I thought it was just an accident until they arrested Paul. But it's weird, there was a swimmer last year . . ." Shari stopped abruptly.

"What swimmer?" Lydia asked

Shari looked around as if she was afraid of being overheard. "The swimmer died suddenly, just like Morgan."

Lydia's heart started to beat faster. She was beginning to sense something big lurking under the surface. "Who was she?"

"Just another swimmer. She was really fast, though. She was

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training for a triathlon."

"Who was there when she died?"

Shari shrugged. "The usual crowd. Everyone swims almost every day."

"Was Paul there?" Shari nodded. "How about Morgan and Kathleen?" Shari nodded again. Those were all the swimmers' names that Lydia knew. She stared mesmerized as Shari's long blue nails tapped on the bench. Lydia liked the color much better than the purple passion she had on.

"Who does your nails?"

Shari smiled. "Kathleen does them for me very cheaply. She works at a salon over on Graham Avenue."

Kathleen had been there for both deaths, and she worked with nail-polish remover on a daily basis. "Let's go there."

"What about my swim?"

"There'll be plenty of time to do it later."

Kathleen was bent over a woman's footbath when they arrived. She looked up and her aspect turned stony, as if she knew exactly why they had come. Lydia wondered if she should have called Romero to let him know about her suspicions, but it was too late now.

Before they could ask what she was doing, Kathleen scrambled up, grabbed a big bottle of something, and ran out the back door. Shari and Lydia lit out after her. Lydia assumed that no one innocent ever ran.

Lydia shouted as she ran out the back, "Call nine-one-one."

Shari was in much better shape than either of them, and caught up to Kathleen easily. But Kathleen had already taken a big swig of nail-polish remover. They watched in horror as she began to thrash around. Her eyes glazed over as if she was seeing something other than the alley.

"No one should be faster than me. I'm the fastest swimmer there is," she raved.

"Oh my God," Shari gasped, comprehending the horror for the first time. "She poisoned Morgan and that other swimmer."

"I'm afraid you would have been next," Lydia said grimly. They could only stay out of Kathleen's way as she flailed around the alleyway, dueling with ghosts. When she went into cardiac arrest, Lydia stepped forward. She started CPR, fearing that it would very likely do no good, but determined to do something. Kathleen was already gone before the EMTs arrived.

Lydia walked Shari out of the alley with her arm around her. "I don't know what to do," Shari said tearily.

"Why don't you call Morgan's sister Guinevere? She would probably feel better knowing that the murderer had been . . . caught." Lydia didn't add that the two of them could remember Morgan together. Hopefully that would help them both feel better. As for Lydia, she was considering taking up jogging. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE CENTER OF THE WEB

by Christian X. Ferdinandus

Translated from the Spanish by Donald A. Yates

Every other Saturday morning, I set out to walk forty-four blocks, which mark the distance—round trip—between my house and the corner of Olazábal and Estomba. That's where my daughter Silvina and my son-in-law Alejandro Di Paolo live. I don't get along well with either one. I visit them solely for the pleasure of spending time with my only (so far) grandson, Juan Francisco.

I spend the alternate Saturday mornings practicing marksmanship at the Argentine Federal Firing Range with a number of weapons that I own.

On that particular morning I left the range before noon. I live on Libertador, between Matienzo and Newbery. As soon as I reached the street and began walking, I lit a cigarette and let my thoughts wander.

I consider myself a reasonably happy man. Once a lowlife, who liked to play at being an artist and a Bohemian, told me that I was a *disgustingly* happy person. If he meant to insult me, it didn't work.

Nonetheless, I also had my serious concerns. The sudden death of my wife was a terrible blow that affected my life in many ways. I am not sentimental and am far from sensitive. In fact, there are some persons who would suggest that I am incapable of pity. Generally, I manage to maintain an apparent outer calm in unnerving circumstances while at the same time suppressing my inner anger.

Christian X. Ferdinandus is the pseudonym of two Argentine writers who are planning a series of crime stories in the manner of the Don Isidro Parodi tales published sixty years ago by their compatriots, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Jorge Luis Borges. Borges's first appearance in print in English was in this magazine in 1948.

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I think I am efficient and well-organized. I rose to occupy an enviable financial position and what people would consider *success*. My businesses are highly regarded on the stock market; I can't say that I am invariably honest, but within the circumstances of my position, I am considered as such. I am president of the Santa Inés Foundation, which makes charitable donations to hospitals and schools. Say what you will, I am a man of civic virtues. Twice I was named one of the outstanding figures of the year by a local news magazine.

From my wife I inherited—when I no longer needed them—shares in Dowland & Grandinetti. I had no interest in remarrying, but I have had—and still have—occasional affairs.

I am very fond of the neighborhood where I live, as well as the building and the apartment that I occupy.

Inside my front door the mail was waiting: utility bills, bank statements, inivitations to conferences or expositions, a postcard from a friend traveling in Europe. . . . Also a padded reddish mailing envelope, of the sort that people use when sending something that should not be folded.

It contained only a photograph. My wife and I, wearing T-shirts and shorts. The date and the place where it had been taken were unmistakable: We were strolling along the beachfront at Copacabana, and that was in 1982, when Inés, age twenty-three, and I, twenty-six, were on our honeymoon. We were engrossed in each other and not posing for the camera. The photo had clearly been taken without our knowledge.

An unexplainable wave of nausea came over me and I dropped the envelope on a table, as if I were shaking loose the hold of a scorpion. For a moment I didn't know what to do. Then, instinctively, I took out my pack of cigarettes and lit one.

On the back of the photo was a notation inside a penciled frame:

> Inés Dowland de Aguirre (1959-1997) and her husband, who murdered her. Sooner or later the truth will come out.
>
> (First message of 3)

The handwriting, in blue ballpoint pen, was shaky and unsteady, with many sharp angles and scarcely any curves.

I felt an emptiness in the pit of my stomach and my face seemed to be burning. What was the purpose of this anonymous attack?

"Be calm," I said to myself. "One thing can't be ignored: *I know* that the accusation is false."

My tendency to see things reasonably began to take over. I tried to put myself into the position of my accuser. Legislative elections were approaching, and I was about to make my entry into politics. I was a candidate for the post of deputy in the Integralist Party. The mysterious mailing must be a political ploy, something intended to disturb me emotionally.

As time went by, I gradually forgot the matter, and recovered my

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usual equilibrium. The large number of issues demanding my attention kept me from dwelling on the hateful creature who was lurking in the shadows.

In addition, I was beginning a difficult week. The possible merging of two companies was causing me a great deal of concern. A number of stockholders who did not look favorably on the move began to sell out their holdings. The value of my stock was dropping sharply. On Wednesday I decided to make my move: I brought together a group of important financial specialists and explained to them the positive benefits of the merger. The point was to generate confidence. In that field I have a lot of experience.

I spoke slowly and casually, in a good-natured tone. I made a few jokes about stock-market superstitions and made up an amusing quote that I attributed to Woody Allen. And, as had happened so many times before, I succeeded in convincing the majority. Thursday, people recovered their serenity and, hours before the market's weekend close, the new company and its market shares reflected large earnings.

A series of favorable events followed. In an article in the Sunday economic section of *La Nación* I stated that the role of politics was to benefit society as a whole, and that I was merely an agent dedicated to securing the well-being of the country.

Everyone in the Integralist Party approved what I had said. Monday, the patriarch of the party, the old and shrewd Antonio Dufour, called for me to see him at his estate in San Isidro.

He wanted to know me personally. He limited himself to just a few words. When I arrived, he said, "The important thing is to show that we're dynamic, that the party has young blood."

The fragile old man, who gave the impression of physical weakness, had just reached the age of eighty-two and had held the reins of the party firmly in his hands for decades.

"You have done very well," he said, and added: "So far. I see an exceptional political career ahead for you."

Those words, considering who spoke them, made me feel serenely confident. I returned to Buenos Aires after two o'clock and later had an unhurried lunch alone at a restaurant on Viamonte Street. I arrived at my office as it was growing dark.

Flavia had left the correspondence on my desk. Suddenly, I stiffened. There was the red envelope, identical to the one that I had received at home. It also lacked a return address.

In this photo, Inés and I were seated side by side at a table with plates, glasses, and drinks before us. There were other persons seated alongside. From certain details, I was able to reconstruct the place, the date, and the circumstances.

Inés at that time would have been around thirty-eight. It was the occasion of a meal with many people present. My wife and I were smiling ear-to-ear, as if we were enjoying some sort of joke offered

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by the diner on my left, who was none other than the attorney Schiaritti. As usual, I held a cigarette between my fingers.

I recognized the house and recalled the event. It was a barbeque at the home of Guillermo Hughes in 1997, a few months before Inés's death.

I felt vulnerable. Without my knowing it, someone had taken those photos. *At least,* those two photos.

A superstitious fear, which I had never experienced before, took hold of me, and kept me—for that moment—from looking at the reverse side. I examined the envelope.

The cancellation stamp was a little smudged. Using a magnifying glass, I could make out that it had been sent our from Postal Branch 31. On my computer, I learned that it was the Villa Urquiza branch, at the 5200 block of Monroe Street.

What inscription was waiting to assault me on the back of the photo? Without turning it over, I put the photo in the envelope and the envelope in my portfolio.

"Flavia," I said into the intercom, "will you bring me a whiskey?"

Flavia noted my trembling hand when I raised the glass.

"Are you all right, dear? You look pale, nervous . . ."

Flavia is the age of my daughter, married to a poor devil, a complacent husband, and in addition to being my secretary, is the consolation of my middle years.

With her finger, she traced a circle on the tip of my nose.

"You're nervous," she repeated.

"Yes," I admitted. "It was a taxing week. I need to take a walk and get some air. I'm done for today."

I downed the whiskey in one swallow. I kissed Flavia on the cheek, put on my overcoat, grabbed my portfolio, and left.

On Leandro Alem Avenue night had fallen and the stiff winter breezes were blowing, carrying the smell of the nearby river.

I had never wanted to have a chauffeur or bodyguards. That trait of simplicity and confidence in myself added to the impression I gave of being independent and self-assured. Journalists, however, were unaware, and continue to be so, that in my shoulder holster I carry a Bersa Thunder Compact .45. It's not the only weapon that I fire at the Argentine Federal Firing Range, but it is the one that I always carry. I am my best chauffeur and best bodyguard.

I didn't take my car out of the company's parking garage. I felt like walking, being alone. With my thoughts confused, I went down the hill from Plaza San Martín. A blast of chill wind obliged me to raise the collar on my overcoat.

Then I entered the bar-restaurant in Retiro Station, located at the end of the Mitre Railroad line. That building, with its anachronistic design, a kind of relic of decades past, always gives me pleasure.

I ordered a coffee, cursed the new ordinance that prohibits smoking in public places, and took out the photograph. I was afraid to

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turn it over and find that shaky, accusing handwriting, that from some distant moment in my life was bringing me to judgment before a phantom tribunal.

When the waiter brought the coffee and left, I forced myself to read the message, written, as before, within a penciled frame. It was linked to the previous one. Evidently, the author of the anonymous texts had designed some kind of progressive game:

> Inés was a careful driver. How could the brakes have failed in a brand-new car, a gift from you on your fifteenth wedding anniversary? The truth cannot be suppressed, *señor* Aguirre. There is only one more step before the facts of the murder come to light.
>
> (Second message of 3)

It was rather late. Nonetheless, without hesitation, I took out my cell phone and called Antonio Dufour.

"I need to speak with you, don Antonio. As soon as possible."

"Come here now then. If that makes you feel better."

My auto was only a few blocks away, but the train was closer, When I arrived at San Isidro, I flagged down a taxi and gave the driver the patriarch's address. The cab drove along dark and tree-sheltered streets for fifteen minutes and then stopped.

Once again the metal fence and the immense garden that I had seen only hours before in broad daylight. A security guard opened the gate.

Beyond the garden, Dufour's mansion.

The old man received me in a showy purple robe. When he sat down, I could see his skinny legs, covered with a downy expanse of white hair. I imagined that beneath the robe he would be in his undershorts.

"I was just getting ready for bed," he said. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"No, thanks. I'll try to be brief. I wanted to ask you if you had ever been compromised by anyone—about your work as a politician?"

"Compromised?" He smiled. "Now I see what your problem is. I've had to deal with worse things than being compromised."

"Worse?" I repeated, a little befuddled.

"I've been charged on five occasions with administrative fraud. What do you say to that?"

"Yes, but I understand that in every case you were acquitted."

The old man could not help laughing.

"Have you ever seen a case when a politician was *not* acquitted?"

I had to smile.

"As far as I am concerned," Dufour continued, "having people believe that I was innocent is more insulting than a prison sentence. The person who is not involved in some type of corruption is an idiot. In politics, people excuse everything. In politics, anything goes, everything is forgotten. There's only one thing you don't recover from . . ."

"You mean from acting stupid?"

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"No, that's not a problem. Even acting like a fool will be forgotten. Corruption, bribery, embezzlement are considered small change in our society. Sometimes they can even seem endearing. No, the only thing that you must be careful about is to protect your private life. It makes no difference how much you have looted from the national treasury. What you have to keep untouchable is your reputation as a worthy *pater familias.* People only insist that there be nothing scandalous in your private affairs. Remember that presidential candidate who was a sure winner. He was a model of honesty and virtue, but someone secretly took a photo of him with a gorgeous woman—who wasn't his wife—and that was the end of his career."

The word "photo" struck me like a blow.

"You can be sure that now," he went on, "our opponents will try to uncover something shady in your professional life."

The anonymous envelopes and my relationship with Flavia suddenly crowded into my mind.

"And if they don't find it, they'll invent something. Journalists will write scandalous pieces and people will simply pay no attention. Well, you wanted to talk to me about something. Is that right?"

He tried to hold back a yawn. He looked very tired.

"Stay calm, Aguirre. Let them say whatever they want to about your professional business. Just so long as no one can poke into your private life, into family secrets, you'll survive anything.

His fatherly tone bothered me. It was true that I had no experience in politics, but I also was not ingenuous. I decided not to reveal to him the real reason for my visit.

When he said, "I'll call a car for you," and picked up the phone, I understood two things: He was aware that I had arrived in a taxi and that the conversation had ended.

That night I had chaotic dreams. Images of Inés appeared in impossible places. People from distant parts came forward and said things that they never could have said. The accident, with the car crushed at the foot of a utility pole, the aroma of the funeral wreaths, the staff of the mortuary . . . Inés was smiling and talking, but she was drenched in the clammy odor of decomposing flowers, an odor that only *now* I was smelling, and that not until this moment had I ever recalled.

As soon as I awoke I went to look for the first envelope and examine the cancelation stamp: It had also been mailed from the postal branch on Monroe Street. I could not help from wondering what enemy I had in Villa Urquiza.

The next three days held a mixture of calm and anxiety. On the one hand I was relieved at not having received the third envelope—which, apparently, would be the last—and on the other hand I could not keep from expecting its arrival.

Work was demanding. When I was alone, I took time to try to decipher the identity of my enemy. Since the photos had been taken

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over a period of fifteen years, from 1982 to 1997, he would be a person from a time removed from the years during which I had achieved my economic ascent, someone who belonged to a distant time, someone who did not exist for me, or, at least, whom I had not noticed among the faces I had known over the past decade.

On Thursday I received—this time at home—the third envelope. It also came from Villa Urquiza. In the first photo, Inés had been twenty-three; in the second, thirty-eight; and in this one, seventeen or eighteen. It must have been from around 1977. She was wearing jeans and a jersey. I am at her side: very slim and in a short-sleeved shirt. It is broad daylight and the sun is shining; in the background can be seen the dome-shaped building that houses the Palermo Planetarium. That was when our relationship was just beginning.

I felt like a dolt. The fifteen years of secret photos had now extended into the past to twenty. For two decades, someone had been photographing Inés and me. And I, always the bright alert fellow, had never been aware.

> Now is the moment to uncover and make known publicly
> the truth about the murder you committed, *sèñor* Aguirre.
> In less than a week, the world will know who you are.
>
> (Message three of 3)

I looked at the three photos of Inés. She had been such a beautiful woman. Who and why and for what reason was someone accusing me of murder? I thought about Dufour's comments regarding the private life of politicians. I tried to find some key, some concept that would make some sense out of these fragments. I read the sentences over and over; I tried moving the words around; I looked for a hidden symbol, some thread that could lead to the deciphering of the mystery. All hopeless.

In the early hours of Friday, I awoke frightened and alert. I had come to understand that the key was not in the messages, but rather in the photos. I laid the three photos out on my desk and examined them once more, now without fear, under the desk lamp. Inés, so young; Inés, with that slightly detached smile that seemed always to me a portal that led to some deep mystery. The photo from 1982: Inés at the beachfront in Rio de Janeiro. The workings of the mind are curious: Suddenly I remembered from the honeymoon an insignificant detail. While shopping at a gallery in the city, we had coincidentally run into Jorge Maximiliano Pérez Migali, a former classmate of mine in high school.

Although I had never taken a liking to him (in fact, I found him rather unappealing), fate had brought us together on several occasions. We both had started together in the Department of Social Economics (I graduated with honors; he dropped out shortly after beginning). It was at a dance organized by some of the students of that department that I met Inés Dowland.

Thanks to her, Pérez Migali and I were offered jobs at

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Dowland & Grandinetti.

Then there came the beginning of my romance with Inés, my rapid promotions, my determination to work harder than anyone else, my talent for developing profitable alliances, and my enviable efficiency. At some point I lost sight of Pérez Migali. I had moved up in the company and he ended up seeming remote and detached, and finally I forgot him. When I established my own company and left Dowland & Grandinetti, I knew he was still there and that, considering his limitations, he was doing all right.

What had become of Pérez Migali since then? I didn't know and I didn't care. But now I remembered with complete clarity that he was in the gallery in Rio de Janeiro and I was positive that he alone—the only person in Rio who knew us—had been able to take the photo in 1982.

I turned on my computer and went on the Internet.

I selected the phone book and typed in *Pérez Migali,* then *Country-wide,* then Enter. This is what I read:

PÉREZ MIGALI JORGE M.
Ávalos 15**
1431 Buenos Aires
(011) 4522-7***

"Aha!" I exclaimed. "Postal zone 1431. It matches branch 31, on Monroe Street, in Villa Urquiza."

Then I went to a street map of Buenos Aires, wrote in *Ávalos 15***, pressed Enter, and saw where Pérez Migali's house was located.

In the heart of a barrio called Parque Chas is a street called Berlin, which has the shape of a full circle. In the place of three diameters are three intersecting streets—Gándara, Victorica, and Ávalos—that, coming in at sixty-degree angles, meet in the center. There, precisely there in that design of a spider web and exactly in the middle of the spider web was the lair of Pérez Migali, the man who was sending me threatening messages.

I called my office and told Flavia that I would be coming in later, around noon.

I bathed, shaved, dressed in suit and tie, slipped the Bersa in my shoulder holster, put on my overcoat, and drove my car from the building's parking garage. I took Libertador, La Pampa, José Hernández, Avenida de los Incas . . . In the 4700 block I parked the car. Before getting out I took the pistol from the holster, slipped it into the right-hand pocket of my overcoat, and put on my leather gloves.

I found Ávalos immediately and walked toward the center of the web.

Darkened, behind weeds and black trees, stood the den of Pérez Migali. The gate was open and there was no bell. I entered the garden. A path of paving stones led from the sidewalk to the door of

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the house. On the outside walls, humidity and neglect had drawn strange, fanciful shapes; the wooded beams were dotted with small holes that were inhabited by almost microscopic insects.

I rang the doorbell.

I waited for a few moments, then, with impatience, I pressed the button without releasing it, hearing clearly how the bell resonated inside the house.

Finally, hesitatingly, a ghostlike figure opened the door, a decrepit man, exuding the smell of death and reduced to mere skin and bones. He was wearing grey pajama bottoms and an undershirt. He was breathing heavily, with difficulty, as if his final hours were near.

It was Pérez Migali.

"You're here at last. Come in."

I entered while Pérez remained behind me for a moment, closing the door. I walked ahead into a large and disorderly living room.

The house—which was not unattractive—was virtually in ruins, The rooms beyond seemed to be filled with the remains of a shipwreck. Pérez Migali lived in the midst of that filth. The odor of mildew and something rotting (spoiling food? dead rodents?) made me feel nauseated, but did not lessen my determination.

The floorboards creaked under my feet. Pérez Migali, limping, bent over, cadaverous, led me to his bedroom and lay back on his bed. The sickly glow from a lamp on the night table seemed to add to the oppressive sense of decay. He gasped for a few minutes, until he got his breath back. His eyes were raised toward the ceiling, as if there were some hidden truth to be found there. Even though he was a miserable sight, I felt not the slightest pity for him.

In my right coat pocket I felt the Bersa. I took off my gloves and put them in the left pocket.

I said to him:

"You're the one sending the envelopes."

"Did you think it could be someone else?"

Slowly he began to sit up until, with great effort, he was able to lean against the headboard. His undershirt, dirty and sticking to his body, outlined his ribs. His hair was greasy and whitened and his face unshaven.

"This is what things have come to. I have lung cancer and I can't stop smoking. I hardly have the strength to leave the house. But recently I found I needed to visit the post office on Monroe Street . . ."

His laugh, as he enjoyed his joke, ended in a hacking cough.

"I don't even go out to buy food. At this point it doesn't matter. Can you give me a cigarette?"

I handed him one. He took a match from a box beside his pillow and lit it.

I took out another one and lit it with my pocket lighter.

He seemed not to be in any hurry.

"It has been days since I ran out of money. You can't know how

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awful it is without tobacco . . . There are so many things you miss."

The constant overpowering stench was annoying me more than Pérez himself. I said: "Tell me what you want . . . Money? I don't feel like discussing it or wasting time. If you want money, I'll give it to you. I just want to get this over. . . ."

He responded with an attack of coughing. The noise of his hacking was driving me mad.

"I don't want money. It never meant a lot to me. I'm not like you. Besides, it's a little late," he said. "It's been too late for some time now. That's why I decided that before I leave this earth you should pay for Inés's murder. . . ."

I felt an enormous visceral anger swelling up in me:

"You bastard, you know that what happened was an accident. I lost my wife and had to manage to raise a daughter alone."

"Don't try to play on my sympathy. I don't believe in the image of a sorrowful husband, deprived of his beloved wife. You killed her. You disabled the brakes in the car. Do you think I don't know that? The car you gave your wife was the safest one on the market. I looked up the statistics. I was good with numbers, don't you remember?"

He pointed to some papers that he had on the night table.

"Do you want to read these? Go ahead. No mechanical problems in Brazil. None in Mexico, none in Chile, none in the United States or in France. And one, just one, in Argentina. Ah, what a coincidence!"

"Listen to me, you idiot. The authorities eventually found the explanation."

"Yes, it's so easy to buy someone's testimony. Didn't you try to buy me off just a few minutes ago? With a little bit of money exchanged, some experts are capable of testifying that your wife is still alive."

He began gasping and coughing up phlegm and the noise heightened my need to kill him.

After an attack of wheezing that shook his body, he said:

"That's not important. I've already done what I had to do."

"And what did you do?"

"I sent a letter to the Homicide Division, with all the information and statistics, and everything relating to you. It's very possible that those fellows may find the story believable and pursue it, with an eye toward their reputations and promotions."

He shook his head as if he were confronting something incomprehensible.

"I could never understand how Inés chose you. Really, you're nothing but a common greedy businessman. In addition," he added, with a grin, "to being tight. You know I'm a poor man. Why didn't you give me your pack of cigarettes instead of offering me just one?"

There were eight or ten left. I kept one for myself and held out the pack to him. But he fell to coughing again and pointed his hand to the night table.

Suddenly he went from coughing to mocking me.

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"Ah, what a splendid gesture, worthy of a true gentleman. . . . She was wonderful, wasn't she? Look at these . . ."

From under the sheets he brought out some yellowed letters and waved them at me. I recognized Inés's handwriting, but I couldn't bring myself to read a single word. "We used to write each other before you showed up, with your practical style and drive to succeed. She was artistic, she painted, read, played the piano . . . You turned her into just a housewife, or better, an administrative assistant. You turned her into 'the manager's wife.' When I ran into you in Brazil, apparently so happy with each other, I sensed immediately that she had surrendered her life. It was evident that she owned a large amount of stock in Dowland and Grandinetti. I thought to myself then that sooner or later you would kill her and inherit it. . . ."

I lost control when I heard him utter these words. I took the pistol from my pocket and, without cocking it, pointed it at his head. Pérez Migali reacted with a mocking smile that increased my rage. A single shot would not suffice for this piece of scum.

I took the pistol by the barrel and with the butt struck the first blow to his head.

He cried out "Ahhh." His eyes closed and his mouth opened.

Now I couldn't restrain myself: one, five, ten, twenty blows. I stopped when I saw that Pérez Migali's head was just a shapeless, bloody mass. I never thought I could have felt such fury and such joy.

I saw blood on my hands and on the butt of the pistol. The bathroom door stood ajar. I pushed it open with my knee and went in. An overwhelming odor of grime and dry urine filled my nose. The washbasin, which had originally been white, was stained with a greenish deposit. Suppressing my nausea, I washed my hands. On the gun, covered with blood, there were a few hairs. I carefully washed the weapon and the tap. I poured water over the faucet and washed out the sink. From the rack hung a filthy towel. I dried off the pistol and my hands with my handkerchief. I checked my clothes and my shoes: not a speck of blood.

I went back into Pérez Migali's room. The body, with its bloody head tilted against the back of the bed, looked like a broken doll. One eye was open, the other shut.

I took a deep breath and began to calm down. That fit of rage was unworthy of me, of my deliberate and controlled personality. My pleasure was not diminished, but I began to think.

Except for the faucet of the washbasin, which was now clean, I hadn't touched anything with my hands. There were no fingerprints. It was obvious that no one came into the house on Ávalos Street, so that Pérez Migali's body could remain where it was for months (or years). When it was discovered (if it was discovered), all that remained would be decomposition and bones.

And, even in the unlikely instance of someone entering in ten minutes, what would the danger be? None. Who could suspect me?

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No one could ever discover the practically nonexistent relationship between Pérez Migali (a person who had disappeared from my life decades ago) and me.

As for his accusations about Inés's death, they wouldn't hold water. It was most likely that Pérez Migali's letter to the Homicide Division had ended up in the wastebasket. But even if they did begin an investigation, how could anyone ever determine anything new about a death that had happened ten years ago? And the most important fact of all was that I *knew* that Inés's death *had been an accident and not a homicide.*

Now, all that was left to do was leave the house, walk to Avenida de los Incas, get in the car, and . . . that was it.

On the floor, leaning against the front door, there was an envelope similar to the three that I had received. Written on it in large block letters were the words LUIS AGUIRRE. When I entered the house, Pérez Migali must have left it there with the intention that I would read it when I left.

I opened it and began to read.

Aguirre:

Everything has been a sham. The statistics are false and there had been many accidents like Inés's. You didn't kill her and I never sent a letter about her death to the Homicide Division.

What's going on is something else.

You took from me the thing I most desired in the world. I had to make you pay for that.

My plan, you pragmatic idiot, was excellent. It consisted in my obliging you to kill me, and I succeeded.

I was terminally ill. My life was worth nothing to me. Yours, no doubt, at least according to your own concept, was worth a lot. That's why I wanted you to kill me. So that for all the years when I was dead, your years in prison would avenge me for the hurt you caused in my life.

You didn't kill Inés, that's true. But you killed me, and I, in turn, on exactly Tuesday, August 21, mailed from the post office on Monroe Street two envelopes: one, which you now know, contained the photo of Inés and you in front of the Planetarium; in the second one was a letter I had written to a Superior Court judge. I made the request that my house be investigated, indicating that I would be found dead there. Of course I made it clear that it was you who had killed me.

I took the precaution of making sure that you would arrive here before anyone else: The enigma that I laid out for you was not very challenging, especially for a bright fellow like you. On the other hand, justice takes its sweet time in this country, and is not in the habit of rushing things too much. My letter is probably being passed around the bureaucratic merry-go-round in the justice establishment. But sooner or later it will end up in the hands of someone in the police department.

Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps within a few days, maybe next

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week, the police will ring the bell at your magnificent apartment on Avenida del Libertador, or show up at your sumptuous offices at Córdoba and Reconquista. You will be arrested, tried, and convicted, and then sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder "with malice aforethought" of a defenseless dying man in his own house, in his own deathbed.

"What a raving maniac!" I said to myself. "Poor devil: a failure, insane, and stupid. No judge, no police official, nobody in the world is going to believe this nonsense.

I put the message into the envelope and folded it in half. The idea of frustrating Pérez Migali's plan brought a smile to my lips. I took the gloves out of the left coat pocket and in their place put the envelope. I put on my gloves and congratulated myself for achieving a certain symmetrical balance: the pistol in the right pocket, the letter in the left, and my hands in the gloves.

I went outside and carefully pulled the door shut, waiting to hear the latch click. I walked along the paving stones to the front gate and closed it, too. On the street a woman with a bag of groceries was passing by; a boy on a bicycle was delivering newspapers. Everything was normal.

Now at ease, I reached the Avenida de los Incas in a few minutes. I got into the car and drove to the office. Just as I had told Flavia, I arrived later than usual. There were several appointments on the schedule and after that, completely in control of myself, I tended to my usual activities.

As a symbol of my triumph, I took out all four of the envelopes I had received from Pérez Migali, with their distressing photos and psychopath's messages, and ran them through the paper shredder. By doing so, I transformed that nightmare into thin little strips of useless paper.

That night I invited Flavia to dinner and afterward brought her home to spend the night.

Now free from troubling concerns, I enjoyed a thoroughly relaxing weekend. On Monday, I took up again my fulfilling existence as a dynamic man of business. On the morning of Thursday the 30th, two police officers, in civilian clothes, showed up at my office. They had, as they indicated solemnly, a written order by Dr. So-and-So, a Superior Court judge, to bring me in for questioning. I didn't offer the slightest objection and didn't take note of the judge's name. I had anticipated that something like this could happen, also knew that this routine inquiry would not lead anywhere.

The officers accompanied me uptown to the courts building. Calm and collected, I entered a large office. In addition to the judge, there were three other men, whom I imagined to be minor functionaries and who remained standing to one side.

The judge turned out to be a man of some fifty years, bald

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and well dressed.

He shook my hand with cool formality. He sat down behind his desk and invited me also to be seated, but directly before him. Then he began speaking, as if he were reciting a lesson.

"I regret to inform you, Dr. Aguirre, that it is my duty to place you under arrest, summarily, as the principal suspect in the murder of a man named Jorge Maximiliano Pérez Migali, a crime that took place is his residence at Ávalos Street 15**, on or about the date of August twenty-fourth, two thousand seven."

I looked him in the eye.

"Impossible," I said. "I have never been in that house," and I added, with a smile, "I have never even heard of Ávalos Street."

The judge brought his hands together, as if he were about to pray. He said: "Señor Pérez Migali sent me a letter . . ."

Ah, I thought to myself, *a letter from Pérez Migali, that chap who's so fond of the epistolary genre.*

"A letter?" I said, indicating surprise.

"You may read it," said the judge. "Here is a photocopy."

I saw once again the damned scribbling. It was a long letter, rambling and incoherent in places. Most of the text dealt with the absurd imaginings of the movements I had carried out, according to Pérez Migali, in his house—wild assertions that neither the judge, nor anyone, would ever be able to believe.

But he ended the letter with these words:

". . . and if after all this you don't believe me, and you doubt that Luis Aguirre was in my house and killed me, you will find his fingerprints on the cellophane wrapper of the pack of cigarettes that you will find near my body, most likely on the night table." ●

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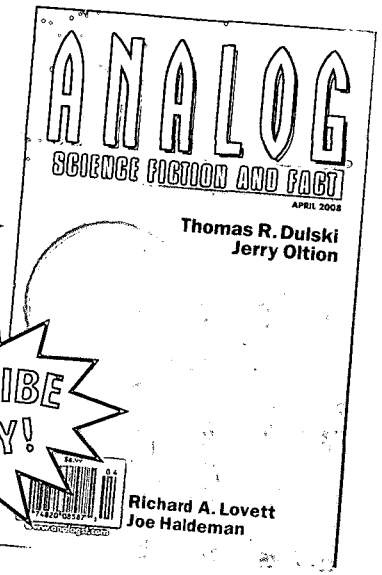

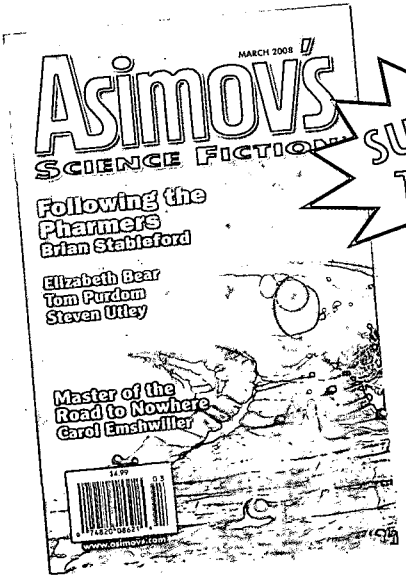

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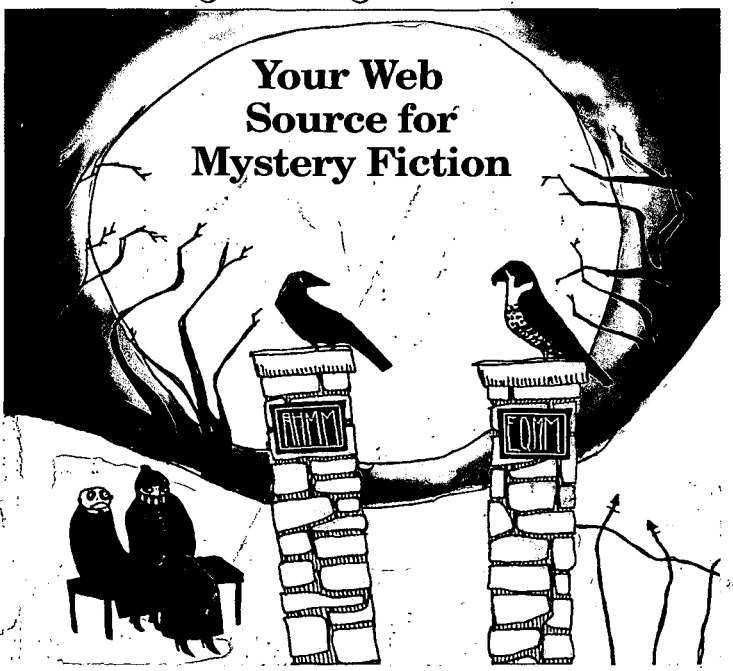

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